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## Becoming a different person in the zone of proximal development : a case study of sixth form students making career and HE choices

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**Barbara Bassot**

**M7234662**

**Becoming a different person in the zone of proximal  
development: a case study of sixth form students making  
career and HE choices**

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)**

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**Becoming a different person in the zone of proximal development: a case study of sixth form students making career and HE choices**

**Abstract**

During the last decade there has been a significant expansion in higher education (HE) in the UK, and widening participation is high on the government's agenda, as it is seen as one means of achieving a better-qualified workforce. In their work with clients, Careers Advisers are required to promote equality of opportunity, which becomes problematic when studies show the HE system in the UK to be segregated along racial lines (Ball et al, 2002; Reay et al, 2001), with students from ethnic minorities much more likely to study in new universities in metropolitan areas, than in older, more established institutions.

This study seeks to explore the ways in which Careers Advisers can promote equality of opportunity effectively, and critically evaluates the possible application of collectivist interpretations of the zone of proximal development, situated approaches and activity theory, to career guidance practice. The methodology chosen is that of social constructivism, and the study focuses on a small number of students (most of whom are from ethnic minorities) from a sixth form college in inner London who are making their HE choices. The method of enquiry adopted is one of a qualitative case study (Basse, 1999), through which the stories of the students are interpreted.

This study shows that whilst agency on the part of the individual may by itself not be enough to widen participation into HE, the opportunity for sixth formers to participate in the community of practice of HE, together with a level of openness to their participation on the part of HE systems could do much to bring about transformatory change in the HE system from within via expansive learning (Engeström, 2001). The work highlights a role for Careers Advisers

Barbara Bassot    M7234662    E990

in promoting individual agency, and in fostering a culture of participation in career guidance.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction and research questions**

Over the past decade since 1993, the number of students participating in HE in the UK has increased by three fifths (DfES, 2004) to a total of 1.8 million. The current government has widening participation in HE high on its agenda, and aims to increase participation towards 50% of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade. Despite this, people from certain minority ethnic groups (namely black African and black Caribbean) remain under represented. Data shows that they achieve on average lower numbers of A' Level points and are much more likely to study in new universities, particularly in London and other metropolitan areas, than in older more established institutions (Bhattacharyya et al, 2003). Furthermore, the participation of students from ethnic minorities in HE in the UK can be described as segregated (Reay et al, 2001).

In its drive to widen participation the government is keen to attract people from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly those with no family history of HE, and many initiatives are now in place to encourage a broader range of people into universities (e.g. Aimhigher). However, questions remain regarding the long-term effect that these might have in terms of widening participation, and whether or not they will address effectively the issues raised above. The newly established Office for Fair Access (Offa) is faced with this challenge in the light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006.

From the early days of career guidance in the UK, Careers Advisers have been required by successive governments to promote equality of opportunity (DfEE, 1995) and today's widening participation agenda should be welcomed by practitioners in this respect. However, the task of promoting equality of opportunity in relation to HE choice becomes problematic when studies show that societal factors such as race, gender and class appear to have a greater impact on HE choice than the desires and aspirations of the individual (Ball et al, 2002). Such a situation could lead to the conclusion that irrespective of the

desires and aspirations of individuals, society's norms establish and maintain a double bind (Engeström, 1995) where HE choice is concerned.

This qualitative study aims to explore the ways in which a small number of students in a sixth form college are making their HE choices with the help of a Careers Adviser, and thereby to explain the impact of career guidance on the HE choice process, as manifested in the career guidance interview. The benefits of this are new insights and understandings about the career guidance process, and the impact it can have on the promotion of equality of opportunity. In career development and guidance literature, psychological and sociological debates have been ongoing, and the degree to which individuals have control over their future or have their future mapped out for them according to societal norms, is still a hotly contested question. Writers from a psychological perspective (Savickas, 2000) tend to focus on the individual as an agent having some degree of control over his or her own destiny, whereas those writing from a sociological perspective (Roberts, 1977) tend to place an emphasis on social variables such as race, gender and class as more reliable indicators of future career than individual choice. Other writers seek to take account of both psychological and sociological factors in relation to career (Barley, 1989; Bell and Staw, 1989). Having reflected on my past experiences, my personal view is that individuals exist within a social context from which they cannot be separated, but that they also have the capacity to develop beyond society's expectations with encouragement and support from others.

In other fields of study in education, debates about learning are enhanced by perspectives from a situated viewpoint (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which seek to integrate the individual and society. Such approaches draw on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and, although mentioned in literature about career, application of his work in this area is generally sorely lacking. This study seeks to address this, by undertaking to evaluate the possible application of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), situated approaches



to learning and activity theory to career guidance and HE choice. This is done in order to explore whether or not the application of such approaches has anything new to say in relation to the ways in which Careers Advisers might be able to promote equality of opportunity, thus enabling students to escape from the double bind. It aims to contribute to the ongoing debate, by offering alternative perspectives and interpretations both of how people make HE choices and how they learn about career.

In essence the research problem that this study seeks to address is: “how can Careers Advisers effectively promote equality of opportunity in relation to HE choice and career when society appears to influence people to conform to its expectations, and what new light might Vygotsky’s ZPD, situated learning and activity theories be able to shed onto this situation?”

### **Research questions**

In the spirit of the qualitative paradigm, the research questions that guided the study emerged and evolved over a long period of time. Initially they stemmed from my long-standing commitment to promote equality of opportunity effectively in a range of contexts, and particularly in relation to HE choice. At the same time I felt a level of discouragement brought about by both the enormity of the task and a level of acceptance of society’s norms that I perceived among some career guidance professionals with whom I interacted. Over time I became deeply committed to finding out more about the ways in which people can develop beyond what society would normally expect of them. The research questions emerged throughout the process of the literature review, the study itself (in particular the period of data analysis), through to the final stages of writing up, evaluation and beyond. They are as follows:

1. How do the students demonstrate individual agency in the HE decision-making process?
2. What factors appear to influence their HE choices?

3. What influence can career guidance have on the dynamics between agency and society?
4. How can these new understandings enhance career guidance practice?

The focus of the first question is on individual agency, and can be identified as a theme in literature about career (Killeen, 1996). In relation to the data from the study, it focuses on what the students said that showed both the importance of agency to them and the influence it could have on enabling them to achieve their goals. The second question focuses on society, and the range of factors that serve to influence career and HE choice. Evidence of this can be seen both in perspectives on career and HE choice, and fundamentally the question seeks to explore how far these students are making their choices in line with what others, such as Reay et al (2001), have found in their research, where 'state variables' like race, gender and class appear to be paramount. Having considered the role of the individual and that of society, the third question seeks to bring the two together, focusing in particular on the role that guidance can have in helping people work through some of the tensions between self and context that are inevitably experienced when making choices. Such tensions can be said to be at the heart of the "conflictual nature of social practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.49) in a career guidance context. The final question seeks to establish some clear recommendations for enhancing career guidance practice.

It is important to state at this point that I was particularly interested in investigating what could be described as career guidance in a formal sense, as seen in the career guidance interview. It is generally accepted that guidance is wider than this, and can and does take place in many different settings and over long periods of time, and involves a number of different kinds of activities (UDACE, 1986). However, my particular professional interest was in the more formal approach to guidance through the career guidance interview, and the ways in which understandings of the ZPD, situated approaches and activity



theory could enhance career guidance practice. This could also serve to enhance my own role as an educator and trainer of career guidance professionals.

However, whilst the focus of the study is on the formal guidance interview, it is important to be clear that the interpretation of the concept of career used throughout this study is a broad one, and can be described as the journey people take through life, in order hopefully to lead them to some sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. For most people a job or some kind of paid work will form one part of this, and there will be many other elements, including family and personal interests that will also come to the fore and play a key part in a person's career. The study focuses on a small number of students in a sixth form college in inner London who are making their HE choices. These choices are clearly only one small aspect of their career in its broader sense, albeit such choices are key. They could be seen as representing crossroads arrived at during the journey, where decisions regarding future direction have to be taken.

As a profession, career guidance can be seen to be relatively under-theorised for a range of reasons. It does not have a strong professional structure, and has often been subject to de-professionalisation. For example, with the advent of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), a level 5 qualification for guidance was deemed to be inappropriate, and the acceptance of a level 4 qualification was hard fought. There are only very small numbers of students studying for Masters degrees in Guidance compared to the large numbers of teachers studying for those in Education, with even fewer studying at doctoral level, and there is little to suggest a strong culture of research. One of the main aims of this study is to bring situated approaches into the professional arena of career guidance, to encourage new understandings and applications to career guidance practice, which in time may serve to broaden the profession's theoretical base.

In some parts of England the advent of the Connexions strategy has led to the disappearance of the job title Careers Adviser, where Careers Services have been completely subsumed within local Connexions partnerships. Here all professional staff are called Personal Advisers irrespective of any specialism they may have. For the purposes of this study the term Careers Adviser is used, as the focus is on the career guidance process, and in the sixth form college concerned the Careers Adviser has retained this title. Readers should note however, that the term should be read synonymously with Personal Adviser with a career guidance remit.

### **Overview of the research carried out**

The aim of the study is to explore issues of HE choice and possible new understandings that the ZPD, situated learning and activity theory could bring to the research problem identified. The study itself took the form of a small-scale qualitative case study of a number of sixth form students in inner London, who were making their university choices. I observed and recorded their career guidance interviews and interviewed each student both before and after their career guidance interview, in order to explore the ways in which their thinking about HE choice was developing. I also had discussions with both the college's Careers Adviser and the Careers Coordinator to gain insights into their perspectives and various college policy documents were examined, along with the college's careers education programme, in order to learn more about the context and culture within which the students were studying and making their HE choices. All of this data and the literature studied was then analysed in relation to the research questions, and from this analysis, implications for practice emerged.

### **My biography**

In undertaking any qualitative study, it is important to recognise the issue of values (Creswell, 1994). In a study reliant upon verbal data from participants and its interpretation by both researcher and readers, it is important to

recognise that all participants in the research process will bring their own experiences, attitudes and values to that process. Cousins (2002) argues that in qualitative research, “meaning is found in the experience of the person observed, but is then re-interpreted through the researcher’s own biases and perceptions” (p.199). She also makes the point that in postmodern times, “all knowledge is partial and is taken from the perspective the researcher holds towards what they are studying” (p.199).

With this in mind, it is important to make clear some of my own perspectives and values from the outset, so that readers can have some understanding of my position, and make their own interpretations. Since the early stages of my career in career guidance I have been both interested in and challenged by issues of equality of opportunity and social justice. During my years of practice I always worked in areas with large numbers of people from ethnic minorities, which I felt added great diversity and interest to my work. In addition I spent several years working in further education colleges with students who were taking a second chance in education and trying to gain entry to HE. For the past fifteen years I have been involved in the education and training of career guidance practitioners. This interest in social justice has been ongoing and has developed through my involvement in the teaching of equal opportunities and reflective practice.

My own biography is woven into this work, and throughout, stories and incidents from my own experience are juxtaposed with literature and data as befits qualitative research of this kind (Sparkes, 1992). In so doing I am acknowledging that, like the students in the study, I too am inseparable from my context.

### **Literature informing the study**

In reviewing literature that has informed the study, I identified themes in relation to learning, career guidance and HE choice, and from these



constructed the following three key theoretical strands. The first is literature that currently informs the career guidance profession, drawn from a range of academic disciplines, for example counselling, psychology, sociology and education. The second strand relates to HE choice and studies that have been carried out into how people choose universities. These studies highlight the segregated nature of the HE system and the subtle pressures on students to conform to society's expectations. The third strand is that of the ZPD, situated approaches to learning, and activity theory, all of which draw on the work of Vygotsky (1978). There are well-established links between the perspectives on career guidance and learning theory (strands one and three), through the work of Law (1996), and Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996). Literature on HE choice (strand two) poses some challenging questions in relation to how people make choices regarding career (strand one), and strand three could offer some alternative perspectives on this. Some initial exploration of each of these three strands will now be offered, along with a rationale for the choice of the strands and their construction.

The focus of the study is career guidance and its potential to promote equality of opportunity among sixth formers making HE choices. The first strand, literature related to career development and guidance, was chosen because of the insights that perspectives within this strand offer, in relation to the ways in which individuals make choices relating to career. In particular debates are ongoing regarding the extent to which individuals make career decisions for themselves (research question 1) or make them in line with societal norms (research question 2). More recently, constructivist approaches have come to the fore, with writers such as Savickas (2000) and Patton and McMahon (2002) viewing the postmodern career as one that is constructed by individuals in an ongoing way, as the notion of a 'job for life' disappears for many; this links with the methodology of the study, as discussed on page 13. Generally such constructivist approaches have tended to reinforce the central position of the individual in literature about career.

The work of Hodkinson and his associates (Hodkinson et al, 1996; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000) has done much to bring together the influences of the individual and society in relation to career (research question 3), and makes this work central in relation to the aims of this study. Here, individuals are seen as inseparable from their social context, but whilst it is acknowledged that individual agency has a part to play, society and its influences appear dominant. Other key perspectives in strand one represent some of the cornerstones of effective client-centred practice, such as the work of Rogers (1965) and Egan (2002).

The second strand, literature on HE choice, was chosen and constructed because of its relevance to a study of career guidance and HE choice. Work in this strand (Reay et al, 2001) considers a range of societal factors, such as race, gender and social class, that influence HE choice (research question 2). Some studies draw on the work of Hodkinson et al (1996) and their concept of careership in identifying a range of factors that seem to influence people and the choices they make, providing a link between the first two strands.

The third strand, with its focus on the ZPD, situated perspectives on learning and activity theory, was chosen and constructed because of its potential to give new insights into both the dynamic between self and society (research question 3) and the possibility of broader systemic change that can be brought about within activity systems, such as that of HE in the UK, in which career guidance could have a part to play (research question 4). In addition, some writers in the field of career development and guidance (Peterson et al, 1996) use the word 'gap' to describe the difference between where a person is now and where they would like to be in the future, and some (Tractenberg et al, 2002) describe guidance as the bridge between the two. In particular the notion of gaps resonates with descriptions of the ZPD, providing a link between strands one and three, and makes the concept worthy of further study in this context, even though the concept itself is not central to Vygotsky's work.

On further study it became apparent that some controversy has surrounded Vygotsky's work, particularly in relation to its translation from Russian into English. Although its translation served to make it more accessible, any translation also involves interpretation, and there has been much debate about what Vygotsky meant when writing about fundamental issues such as thought, language, culture and society, and whether or not these meanings have been accurately represented in translation (Gillen, 2000). Indeed, Gillen argues that some key concepts such as the ZPD have been misinterpreted.

Since his death, writers have taken some of Vygotsky's ideas and inevitably interpreted them in different ways. As a result the following three groups of interpretations of the ZPD can be found in literature (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The first group is termed a scaffolding interpretation, which focuses on the relationship between the learner and the more experienced individual in the social construction of knowledge (Wood, 1998). The second group is termed a cultural interpretation, which focuses on the difference between knowledge passed on through instruction, and knowledge generated by everyday experience (Davydov and Markova, 1983). The third group is termed a collectivist interpretation, which views the ZPD more broadly as the difference between what an individual can achieve alone, and what people can achieve in collectives in seeking to bring about change. Here, situated perspectives on learning come to the fore, where learners are viewed as individual agents integrated within their social world, learning by participation in communities of practice; along with activity theory, where activity systems interact with one another and change comes about from within.

### **A fundamental choice**

As the study progressed it became clear that a more general study of all of the interpretations of the ZPD described above was too broad and too large for the scope of this study, therefore I was then faced with a decision regarding focus. After much deliberation, I decided to focus on the third group or collectivist



interpretations of the ZPD for the following reasons. In the earlier stages I had for some time been interested in the concept of scaffolding and saw it as a different way of describing much of what I observed in, and understood about, guidance interactions. Wood's (1998) descriptions of scaffolding activities resonated with many things that guidance practitioners are involved in (e.g. helping the learner see things from different perspectives), but feedback suggested that this might show little that is new and not already known. At doctoral level it is important that research develops new insights, understandings and knowledge, and I became unsure as to whether scaffolding in guidance could be shown to be saying anything that is uniquely different from what is already known about the career guidance process. Another cause of concern was Guile and Young's (1998) description of scaffolding as normative. Over time I began to appreciate that a study focusing on collectivist interpretations could give me the opportunity to "focus on processes of social transformation" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.49) through a study of the possible application of activity theory (Engeström, 1995) and this also maintained a clear link with my chosen methodology of social constructivism. All of this felt much closer to my ongoing commitment to issues of equality of opportunity and social justice.

## **Methodology**

The methodology, or theory of knowledge that has informed the study, is that of social constructivism, as befits a study of the application of Vygotskian perspectives in a career guidance context. Here the emphasis is on the social construction of meaning via activity and interaction with others. From this perspective, knowledge and truth are not absolute, but are created through processes of social interaction. This supports a subjectivist epistemology, where researcher and subject create a space to explore understandings via a process of interaction and interpretation.



Bearing all of this in mind, it was then important to select a method that would provide opportunities to talk to people directly in order to appreciate their perspectives, and to observe them engaging in the process of constructing meaning through interaction. A case study method was employed, to gain access to verbal data that could then be interpreted in the light of both literature and the research questions. This verbal data is often rich in interpretations and meanings and gives insight into why people do things, as well as what they do.

In order to gain access to this data, it was important to select a method that would allow access to discussions with relevant people (e.g. students, Careers Advisers, Careers Co-ordinators), and to relevant documents that would give important background detail. This detail serves to form key parts of the backdrop against which decisions are made, such as programmes of Careers Education and tutorial support. Rather than seeking to gain general impressions by gathering verbal data from a range of sources, where any number of variables could be at work, a case study method focusing on a number of students in a particular setting was chosen, in order to facilitate a more in-depth exploration. It was also important to consider the wider context of the research, and in particular the agenda of widening participation in HE in order to consider possible implications for career guidance practice.

Layder's (1993) theory building approach is useful in helping researchers to think about their research on different levels. Layder's approach serves to strengthen the study, in that it facilitates a full account of the theoretical environment in which the study takes place. This ranges from the researcher's own position with his or her values and assumptions through to a broad range of issues identified in literature. In this study, Layder's map is interpreted in the following way.

*Self* – my own biography and what I bring to the research process as a white woman from a working class background, via my professional experience, all set in a social context.

*Situated activity* – the research study and the interactions with A’level students, the Careers Adviser and Careers Co-ordinator, during which I explore the relationship between self and society.

*Setting* – an examination of the sixth form college’s policy and professional issues within the research environment.

*Context* – the broader policy context of guidance and in particular, HE choice.

I will refer to this model again in Chapter 5, where it will provide a framework for evaluation (including the limitations of the study).

### **A pen picture of the research setting**

The study itself was carried out in a large Catholic sixth form college in inner London, which draws its students from schools across South London. There are over 1000 students, male and female, most of whom are aged between 16 and 19 years, with the majority of students drawn from a wide range of ethnic minorities. Over 600 students are studying for Advanced level qualifications (A’ Level, AS level, BTEC National etc.) and the college is cited as in the top 6% of colleges nationally, as a result of OFSTED inspections.

Careers education and guidance in the college has a high priority and is integrated within the core curriculum for all students. This core curriculum also contains a Religious Education programme, thus placing it in a pivotal position, absolutely central to the achievement of the college’s Christian aims. Prospective students are asked to sign a document before their course starts, agreeing to follow the core curriculum as well as their academic programme of study.

The Head of Careers and Learning Resources is a member of the Core Curriculum Group; along with the Head of Religious Education, the Enrichment Co-ordinator, the Head of Key Skills and the Deputy Head of one of the four faculties who represents personal tutors. This Core Curriculum Group reports to the College's Management Development Committee, made up of the four Heads of Faculty, the head of Core Curriculum, and the College's Principal and Vice-Principal.

The Core Curriculum is delivered by personal tutors in a total of sixty mixed age and ability tutor groups. For the Careers Education component (six periods per year) the students are set into groups according to their course of study (e.g. A2, AS level, BTEC), so that the work can be targeted towards the students' particular needs. The aim of careers education and guidance at the college is "to empower students to develop effective plans about their futures" with "the most important outcome ... that students will take realistic but ambitious decisions about their futures" (College Careers Education and Guidance Policy, 2001, p.1).

Equality of opportunity is high on the college's agenda, as it seeks to provide "opportunities equally to all students, whatever their race, gender, ability or religious experience" (College Prospectus 2003-2004, p.4). The College has a well-developed proactive equal opportunities policy, which includes the aim of working together "to become more aware of any attitudes reflecting prejudice or inequality which may exist within the College." The reasons behind the choice of the sixth form college are articulated in Chapter 3.

### **Structure and summary**

This first chapter seeks to provide an introduction to the study, and this final section outlines the structure of the work. Chapter 2 engages in a critical evaluation of literature from the three strands constructed, and serves both to shed light onto the research questions and to point to fruitful areas of enquiry.

Chapter 3 provides both a rationale for and critique of the methodology, method and research techniques employed, and Chapter 4 focuses on data analysis, in particular the stories of the students and the ways in which their career guidance interviews helped them to consider their HE choices. In Chapter 5 an evaluation of the study is given, highlighting both its strengths and limitations, with pointers for development and further research. The work concludes in Chapter 6, highlighting some implications for guidance practice and the ways in which career guidance might be better able to promote equality of opportunity in relation to HE choice. Throughout the work my own perspectives and thoughts drawn from my professional experience, and my reflections on literature and practice are included, in order to adopt a critical and questioning approach to everything that I experienced in the research process.

In this chapter the aims of the study and its rationale have been articulated along with the research questions that have guided it. An overview of the research carried out has been given and some key issues in relation to my own biography have been discussed. Three theoretical strands were identified and given some preliminary consideration, along with the fundamental choice with which I was faced as the study progressed. The methodology of the study has been introduced, followed by a pen picture of the research setting, and the structure of the work outlined. All of these areas will be explored and explained in much more depth in the forthcoming chapters, and the following chapter moves into an in-depth exploration and critical analysis of literature relevant to the study.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature review**

#### **Introduction**

The central aim of the study is to seek to examine the ways in which a small number of students in a sixth form college in inner London are making their HE choices with the aid of a Careers Adviser, and thereby to explain the impact of career guidance on the HE choice process, as manifested in the career guidance interview. The students' career guidance interviews are analysed in order to investigate the research questions, which focus on the ways in which the individual and society can be integrated through the application of Vygotsky's ZPD, situated perspectives on learning and activity theory. Following on from the research questions detailed in Chapter 1, a review will now be presented, which seeks to discuss and critically evaluate relevant literature, in order to throw light onto these questions and the study in general. The participants in the study are students at a sixth form college who are making HE choices with the aid of a Careers Adviser, and throughout this chapter literature will be reviewed via an examination of a range of professional and policy issues related to the students and their situation. This will serve to bring some key conflicts and dilemmas experienced by both career guidance practitioners and their clients to the fore, and befits a review of literature for the purposes of a professional doctorate.

The issues that come sharply into focus in this chapter are ones that are commonly encountered by career guidance practitioners, but in response to which there are no simple, straightforward answers. The central issue, that of realism, is chosen because of its capacity to raise many fundamental questions in relation to career guidance practice and HE choice. Realism here is considered from the perspective of the sixth form student making HE choices, who is asking such questions as, am I being realistic in the choices I am making? Am I likely to get a place? Other relevant issues such as client-

centredness, impartiality, social engineering and social reproduction are debated in relation to issues of realism. The literature reviewed in this chapter is drawn from the three strands identified in Chapter 1; the first is literature that currently informs the career guidance profession, the second, literature on HE choice, both of which are compared and contrasted with literature from the third strand that relates to the ZPD. Throughout the review these strands are interwoven via a discussion of issues relevant to career guidance and HE choice. Reference will also be made throughout to the four research questions as detailed in Chapter 1. All of this will be interspersed with stories (in particular the story of Jimmy) from my own biography and professional experience, which shed light onto my emerging understandings.

The chapter begins with a description of the rationale for the literature identified, and the ways in which the literature search was carried out. In order to set the review in context, this is followed by an examination of some foundational approaches to career, which highlights the ongoing debate between self and society. A consideration of a perceived move from positivism to constructivism in literature about career then follows, along with an introduction to the concept of the ZPD. The issue of realism is then brought to the fore, and is used in order both to critically evaluate other approaches relevant to the study and to compare and contrast these with the ZPD. The story of Jimmy is used in order both to pose some key questions in relation to realism, and to offer some possible alternative understandings through the application of the ZPD. The chapter continues with a consideration of what the work of Vygotsky and those who follow after him, may have to contribute to the debate about realism, career and HE choice.

### **The rationale for the literature identified, and how the literature search was carried out**

In this section I will describe the rationale for the literature I have identified and the ways in which I undertook the search itself. As discussed on page 10,

the literature falls into three strands. Prior to the commencement of the study, I encountered the work of Vygotsky (strand three) during the first year of an MA programme. At this time I became particularly interested in the concept of the ZPD because of its focus on a capacity for change, and through discussions with students and staff at work, I began to question whether or not the ZPD concept could usefully be applied to career guidance, in particular its capacity to provide insights into the dynamic between self and society (research question 3). At that time I had not encountered the ZPD in any of my reading related to the professional field, and felt that this could signal a gap in relation to understandings about career. At that time, Law (1996) began to publish work in relation to his career learning theory (strand one), which emanates from a symbol processing view of learning (Bredo, 1994), with its descriptions of sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding. Also around this time, Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) were updating their social learning approach to career, which was originally based on the work of Bandura (1969). There was, therefore, an established link between learning theories and career, summed up by Killeen's (1996) words "every career theory acknowledges or assumes 'learning'" (p.34). It seemed that exploring the possible application of the ZPD to career could be worthwhile.

I began to explore literature about the ZPD from a range of sources, and for some considerable time early on in the development of my work, I felt that the construct of scaffolding could have much to offer to understandings of the career guidance interview and, as a result, scaffolding became a central theme in my literature search. However, when reading literature about HE choice (strand two), and as my understanding of scaffolding became deeper, I began to question how far it could shed light onto my interest in the promotion of equal opportunities and social justice. In particular, Guile and Young's (1998) description of scaffolding as normative caused me to re-assess this, and this was reinforced by some preliminary data analysis, which appeared to show that the career guidance interviews observed tended to confirm (or even restrict)



students' expectations rather than extend them (research question 2). I was then left questioning how scaffolding could add to understandings of career guidance practice and the promotion of equal opportunities (research question 4).

It also became clear that the ZPD has been interpreted differently by various writers and that these interpretations generally fall into three groups (scaffolding, cultural and collectivist); so I began to explore these. Literature on HE choice that I read brought out the segregated nature of the UK HE system (research question 2). In addition, my own interest in change developed from one where individuals change and develop through such constructs as scaffolding, to the ways in which broader systemic change might come about. Collectivist interpretations of the ZPD began to come to the fore, with their descriptions of collectives that can have a capacity to effect change from within. In particular my thinking developed as I read Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on participation, and I began to consider ways in which the HE system could be changed by the participation of students like those in my study. However, the students in the sixth form college were still largely outside the HE system, and Engeström's (2001) work on activity systems, in particular the ways in which systems interact with one another, seemed particularly relevant. The notion that change can be brought about from within through expansive learning, thereby reducing the effect of the double bind, was very attractive to my interest in equality of opportunity and social justice in relation to HE.

I would describe undertaking the literature review as an intellectual journey, which took various twists and turns along the way. Having begun with an interest in scaffolding, ultimately I felt it might not have as much to offer as I had originally thought. However, it did give me a clear focus for a period of time, and through this my own ideas and understandings developed and moved forward into a much closer examination of situated approaches and activity

theory. I used various mechanical tools to help me undertake the review, including library catalogues, online indices of journal articles, online databases such as EBSCO and the ZETOC alert system. A good filing system, both manual and IT based also proved very valuable. In the next section I move on to an overview of debates in literature about career.

### **An overview of literature about career: the self and society debate**

In this section a broad overview of career guidance literature will be given, in order to set the review of literature in relation to the study in its context. In the field of career, psychological and sociological debates have been ongoing, and the degree to which an individual has control over their future or has their future mapped out for them according to societal norms, is still a hotly contested question. This section highlights the continuing debate separating the individual and society.

The ways in which people make their career choices have been the subject of much study and lively debate. The general theoretical terrain of career is broad and interdisciplinary in nature, with approaches drawn and derived from such fields as psychology, sociology and education. Influences from other areas of the social sciences such as economics, politics and management can also be seen. In contemporary educational research the determinist/voluntarist debate is ongoing and, in this regard, literature about career is no exception. Within this debate, the degree to which individuals are conditioned by their external circumstances or have the capacity to create their own environment is hotly contested (Cohen et al, 2000). In such debates individuals and society are sometimes placed somewhat simplistically as polar opposites, and where career is concerned, many approaches give much greater emphasis to the individual.

Parsons (1909) can be seen as the founder of vocational psychology, and was an advocate for young people, women and the socially disadvantaged

(O'Brien, 2001). He advocated that people needed to understand themselves clearly (aptitudes, abilities, interests etc.), have knowledge of work and what it requires, and have the ability to put these two things together through reasoning. This was the birth of trait factor matching approaches, and signalled the advent of career assessment and testing, which sought to match the individual with the job. The emphasis at this time was on individual differences, and approaches were largely psychological in nature (research question 1). Far from being extinct or even outdated, these approaches still have a place today, and can be particularly helpful to clients who are facing some kind of turning point in their lives. Current examples of such approaches are the Morrisby profile used extensively in the independent schools sector, and the common assessment tool developed for Connexions Personal Advisers.

The strengths of matching approaches lie in their capacity to give an individual a picture of himself or herself and to generate ideas regarding possible options for the future. However, weaknesses in such approaches could be said to be their static nature and lack of focus on change. One danger is that they can promote a directive approach, where particular occupations are recommended in line with test results. Some assessment mechanisms have also been criticised for their lack of attention to issues of cultural differences (Leong and Hartung, 2000)

As the twentieth century progressed, the individual remained as the focus of trait factor theories of vocational choice, with Holland's (1985) theory of occupational personalities being particularly prominent. Any theory like Holland's, which seeks to categorise people by their occupational personality, will face criticism on the grounds of both exclusion and duplication, i.e. individuals that feel either they do not fit into a prescribed category, or that they fit into more than one. The same lack of 'fit' can also be applied to occupations. Holland's work is still very much in evidence today and there are a number of websites dedicated to helping people undertake online tests in



order to assess their vocational preferences (Psychological Assessment Resources, 2001).

From the early stages of career and guidance theory, approaches remained predominantly psychological in nature with their emphasis placed firmly on the individual (research question 1). This was particularly evident in the work of Super (1957) and his developmental theory, which described the different life stages through which individuals progress, with little reference to the influence of society. Much of the literature in the field of career guidance, like that written by Super, originates from the United States, and it may be fair to say that the individualistic nature of American society and culture, has served to keep the individual at the centre and society on the periphery (Rogoff, 1990).

Theories about career remained predominantly psychological in nature until the late nineteen sixties and early seventies, when certain sociologists became interested in how people make their career decisions within social structures. The work of Roberts (1977, 1993) is particularly well known in the UK, and was written in direct opposition to the dominant psychological approaches of the time (research question 2). Roberts, observes that the effects of social variables such as race, gender and social class on achievement and career choice, play a much greater part in people's choices than their individual wishes and desires. Since the seventies, the stage has been set for the psychological/sociological debate to continue, with the advantages of psychological approaches fuelling the disadvantages of sociological approaches, and vice versa.

When reviewing literature about career, it is too simplistic to reach the conclusion that some approaches are psychological in orientation and deal only with the individual, and others are sociological in orientation and only focus on society. Many seek to take both viewpoints into account, and more recently

some writers have sought to draw on both psychological and sociological perspectives in writing about career. These approaches are often referred to as the subjective (psychological) and objective (sociological) career (Barley, 1989) and the internal (psychological) and the external (sociological) career (Bell and Staw, 1989). Rather than seeing perspectives in opposition, they are seen as complementary, with the strengths of both sides being emphasised. Even here however, self and society appear to remain separate.

More recently the work of Hodkinson and Bloomer and their associates (Hodkinson et al, 1996; Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000) has sought to explore and explain the inter-related nature of self and society in career, and this particular aspect of their work and its clear relationship to the aim of this study gives it a central position in this literature review (research question 3). Their work is discussed in detail on pages 42-49.

Having considered some foundational theory, I will now move on to a consideration of a perceived re-orientation of theoretical perspectives in relation to career, from positivist notions of a career for life to constructivist ones of career as a pathway through life.

### **The changing concept of career: from positivism to constructivism**

In this section a range of more recent literature is reviewed, which highlights a move from positivist notions of a career for life, to views of a postmodern career constructed by individuals in an ongoing way throughout their lives. In viewing career in this way, the HE choices of the students in the study can be seen as the next phase in the construction of their career. The section points to both the pace and scope of change, and as society develops, career also becomes open to change and re-interpretation, as society's norms are questioned. This understanding of the changing nature of career could also point to the ways in which a phenomenon such as where students from ethnic minorities undertake HE level study, could also be subject to change. In

addition, such constructivist approaches are in tune with the methodology adopted in the study.

Over the course of the twentieth century, and during the early part of the twenty-first, the concept of career has been the subject of significant change and re-orientation. During the majority of the previous century, the words career and work, or more particularly paid work, were seen as synonymous. As discussed in the previous section, the work of career practitioners involved making an assessment of the individual in relation to occupations in order to seek a good match between the two. From an ontological perspective this can be perceived as falling within the paradigm of positivism, where the objective reality of a career for life, to which a person could be matched, was sought. In the later part of the twentieth century various factors caused people to question this notion of a job for life, not least in times of economic recession, when paid work was scarce as the manufacturing base of the economy declined. More recently (particularly in the last ten to fifteen years) the impact of rapid change in the world at large became evident, in particular through the growth of information and communication technology and the impact of globalisation. Jackson et al (1996) comment, “we are in an era of unprecedented changes, at both global and local levels, which have the capacity to transform the nature and structure of careers” (p.9).

Storey (2000) considers a whole range of developments in relation to change, and their impact on the concept of career. These include globalisation, rapid technological advances, deregulation of labour markets from employment protection to employment flexibility with greater levels of job insecurity, the downsizing and de-layering of many organisations and changing employment patterns. She ends with changes in education, which point to a better qualified workforce, equipped with transferable skills that can be transported from one job to another. The individual takes their skills and knowledge from one situation to the next, re-training and up-skilling in the process. All of this



resonates with discourses of post-Fordism in the postmodern world, as put forward by Edwards (1993), who speaks of the need for “Multi-skilled, flexible workers” who, “as demands change ... are able to drop old tasks and take up new ones” (p.179). This points to the changing nature of jobs themselves, where individuals working within an organisation can find that their job changes almost beyond recognition, and workers need continuous training and development in order to keep pace with the changing demands of the workplace.

Much of the above could appear to paint an overly rosy picture of the impact of globalisation on career, implying that individuals can move easily from one situation to the next as circumstances change. By implication, a better-qualified workforce will be able to pick and choose which opportunity to take up next, as the choices become wider. However, we should also question whether or not this is the case for everyone. This rosy picture is in essence what Colley (2000) describes as a “triumphalist” view of the nature of globalisation (p.16) where people are expected to view change as an opportunity to do something better or more fulfilling, not a threat to things they might be losing. Storey (2000) is right to point to greater levels of job insecurity for many, and even those who are well qualified can and do experience periods of unemployment, when the next opportunity is unclear and slow to come to fruition. Change will not always result from personal choice, as employers downsize and re-structure endlessly in response to external and internal factors. Many young people grow up in families where adults experience growing levels of job insecurity characterised by redundancy and periods of uncertainty. Stability and a return to the notion of a job for life may seem attractive to many experiencing such discontinuity.

This poses the question, what will be the fate of those who remain unqualified and unskilled? In recent years government agendas have been linked with targets for achieving what are seen to be desired outcomes. Any target, such as



the percentage numbers of students gaining 5 A-C passes in GCSE examinations, will always leave a certain proportion who do not meet it. So what will happen to these young people and other older workers who remain unqualified and unskilled? Edwards (1993) points to the often optimistic pictures painted of globalisation as “the minority experience” (p.184), which leaves the majority struggling in intermittent low paid work, and high levels of insecurity. However, in an individualistic society such as ours, it would appear that only the individual is to blame for this situation, due to being poorly qualified and unskilled (research question 1).

As individuals are constantly faced with change, often huge both in its amount and pace, they are forced to adapt and need to be able to navigate a pathway through life. They need to develop the knowledge and skills to enable them to learn which steps to take next, in order to manage their own career. Savickas, (2000) asserts that people need to become “managers of their own worklives” and that “Career must become more personal and self-directed to flourish in the postmodern information age.” (p.59). Gothard et al (2001) assert the need for ongoing guidance, “Guidance will be required throughout life, rather than just at the entry to the labour market” (p.89), but also point to the need for guidance practitioners to rethink the purpose of guidance in a world where the concept of career is inherently unstable. Positivist traditions with their emphasis on planning, ideally suited to stable environments, are rejected in favour of constructivist approaches, where the client becomes an active participant in the process (McMahon and Patton, 2002), as such approaches can enable individuals to adapt to change more easily. Patton and McMahon (2002) argue that “reconceptualising career guidance as lifelong learning” is necessary if “individuals are to construct satisfactory life careers for themselves within changing environments” (p.40). The possibilities of being matched to a career for life appear to be being replaced by the notion of people needing to find their own pathway through life. This pathway will be different for different people, reflecting a relativist ontology with the existence of

multiple realities. Against this backdrop, the HE choices of the students in the study can be seen to represent the next step along this pathway.

Such views again seem to place their emphasis on the individual, and serve to keep self centre stage in literature about career (research question 1). The extent to which anyone can navigate their own pathway through life and manage their own career seems highly contestable. Career management seems to imply a degree of control on the part of the individual, and even someone like myself, who could be described as well qualified and experienced, is left questioning how far I can manage my own worklife, when during a fairly recent college merger I was left feeling that I had no control over it at all. The re-conceptualisation of guidance as lifelong learning also continues to place the onus squarely on the shoulders of the individual, who has to manage their career and adapt to change. The notion of career management may be alien to many who feel trapped as a result of social exclusion, leaving them with the feeling that they have no career to manage. Literature about career is again left with approaches that both separate self and society and which are dominated by the individual.

This two preceding sections have given some background to the review and set the scene for a critical consideration of literature relevant to the study. Having established that perspectives on career have overall maintained the separation of the individual and society (with the exception of writers such as Hodgkinson and his associates) the review now moves on to consider the position of social constructivism in relation to the debate on self and society.

### **Social constructivism**

Vygotsky's work falls within the paradigm of social constructivism and, as the term suggests, social constructivists argue that knowledge is constructed through activity rather than acquired. The word 'social', when linked with constructivism, is important in two different ways. Firstly, it highlights the

interpersonal nature of learning, where people are seen to construct knowledge and meaning through interactions with others. Secondly, it emphasises the social and cultural context of learners, which can be characterised by the norms and values passed on to them through generations; and is often referred to in this particular vein as socioculturalism. Language performs a central role in both instances, as it is the means by which people both interact and pass on culture and traditions through generations (Gergen, 1995). From a social constructivist perspective it is argued that people develop *in* society, and are immersed in and inseparable from their culture via processes of communication. Here, career is constructed in an ongoing way through interactions with others in a cultural context (research question 3) and this is described by Chen (2003) as “a socially constructed process that reflects both individual actions and the person’s interactions with others” (p.205).

Very few references can be found in literature about career to either Vygotsky or to the work of those who follow after him. Some exceptions are the work of Young et al (1995) and their contextual explanation of career, Peavy’s (2000) work on sociodynamic counselling, Bloomer’s (2001) work on some of the theoretical considerations underpinning a case study of young people in further education, and a reader published by the Department for Education and Skills (2001) for people participating in Understanding Connexions courses, where Vygotsky’s work is included in a chapter on learning theories. This minimal number of references to the work of Vygotsky, and those who have sought to develop their work from his ideas, points to both a gap in the literature about his work in relation to career and to the original nature of this study.

The possibility of people developing *in* society through the application of social constructivist perspectives is helpful to a degree when considering the aims of the study, but questions then arise. For example, as people develop in society through the medium of language and interactions with others, does this then mean that society and its practices are passed on and that these practices



then become normative? Do people then achieve merely what their social context predicts or expects? Is culture so pervasive that it subconsciously (or even consciously) dictates via interactions what people do, thereby promulgating and even legitimising such things as stereotypes? Or does the individual also have a part to play? Here social constructivism offers useful insights into aspects of culture and individual agency, which serve to give further indications of its position in the self and society debate. This relates to research question 1 on page 5 and will now be considered.

Writing from a social constructivist perspective, Bruner (1996) describes culture as “superorganic” (p.3) in its capacity to grow and be passed on from generation to generation. People learn and develop by making sense of their experiences in the world, and these meanings are informed by the culture in which the experiences take place. In this sense culture can be seen to shape the minds of individuals. In this study, the students learn about HE choice and make sense of this through the culture in which they are located. Their culture includes the college and their life experiences as people from a particular ethnic group, which then shapes the decisions they make. Bruner argues that “Nothing is ‘culture free’” but makes the point that “neither are individuals simply mirrors of their culture” (p.14). This is where individual agency and evaluation become two key factors.

Bruner (1996) defines individual agency as “the sense that one can initiate and carry out activities on one’s own” (p.35). An individual’s agency enables him or her to gain experiences of the world, which are then recorded as a kind of personal history. All of these experiences take place in a cultural context and form the individual’s “self with history” (ibid.) Past experiences help individuals to try to predict what may happen in the future, self “with possibility” (ibid.). These past experiences will inevitably encompass what individuals will perceive as successes and failures, and here the aspect of evaluation comes to the fore, as individuals try to gauge how successful they



have been (or otherwise) in achieving what they set out to achieve. The evaluation of past experiences will enable individuals to assess themselves in relation to their future. In making their HE choices, the students in the study are demonstrating agency and evaluation as they try and assess their chances of success in gaining entry to courses in which they are interested. They are evaluating their experiences so far in their self with history, to try and gain some understanding of their self with possibility.

In relation to the self and society debate, the position of social constructivism can be argued as that of self *in* society. But even taking all of this into account, could it still be possible that this simply serves overall to encourage the individual to conform to society's norms? For some individuals, using past experience in order to build on success and avoid failure is important, and this in turn may mean that through their own agency they tend to conform to what society expects, whereas others are more comfortable taking risks. In this respect is self really *in* society, or are individual agents simply responding *to* society? Are the students in the study simply responding to the messages that society communicates regarding where they might study (e.g. in new universities in metropolitan areas)? Bloomer (2001) argues that social constructivism, like symbolic interactionism, has a limited ability to bring self and society together, and in this respect I would have to agree. This then demands a further exploration of the three different interpretations of the ZPD, including their strengths and limitations.

### **The three interpretations of the ZPD**

In his own research with children, Vygotsky identified two developmental levels; the actual developmental level of the child based on achievement tests, and the level of potential development as shown through assisted problem solving. Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under

adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p.86). Writing from a social constructivist perspective, Wood (1998) describes the ZPD as “the ‘gap’ that exists for an individual (child or adult) between what he is able to do alone and what he can achieve with help from one more knowledgeable or skilled than himself” (p.26), and is an indication of learning potential. This is termed a scaffolding interpretation of the ZPD, and literature here focuses on an examination of the interpersonal and pedagogical relationship between learner and teacher. Much attention has been given to this particular construct, particularly in research in the context of primary education, and increasingly in other areas of education too. A study of career guidance and HE choice from this perspective would involve a detailed analysis of career guidance interviews, in order to begin to define scaffolding in this context.

In many senses Vygotsky’s notion of the ZPD can be said to be both vague and ambiguous and, perhaps like anything described as a gap, is inherently difficult to observe because of its abstract and intangible nature. In seeking to describe the ZPD in relation to individuals, some writers view it in spatial terms, (Miller, 1983), which can lead to debates about whether different individuals have ZPDs of different sizes, and whether or not these can be measured. Others (Bockarie, 2002) take a temporal view and see it as being limited to a time span. Tharp and Gallimore (1998) appear to combine both views in their description of the ZPD in four stages, with Stages III and IV pointing to recurring cycles of learning throughout life in response to change, suggesting the possible application of the ZPD concept to lifelong learning. However, descriptions of the ZPD in terms of time and space serve to render the concept as something concrete that can be seen and experienced, which can limit learning in the ZPD to some kind of artificial linear process. However, Vygotsky’s use of the word proximal indicates an important facet of learning in the ZPD, suggesting that people tend to learn things that are proximal to them and their experience, rather than at a distance.

As indicated in Chapter 1, initially the concept of scaffolding interested me, as I felt it resonated with many aspects of client-centred career guidance practice, in particular the ways in which knowledge about career can be constructed through interactions with Careers Advisers. However, Guile and Young's (1998) description of it as normative concerned me, particularly bearing in mind my abiding interest in equal opportunities and social justice. If scaffolding in the ZPD is simply a means of enabling people to build on their achievements and achieve what society expects, how does this serve to break any new ground, particularly in relation to my own interests and commitments? On further examination, I was also unsure whether or not scaffolding in career guidance could be shown to offer something new and distinctive from what is already known.

The second interpretation of the ZPD is termed cultural. Writers such as Davydov and Markova (1983) have focused on the cultural aspects of Vygotsky's work, and have interpreted the ZPD as the difference between cultural knowledge and everyday experience. The particular focus here remains with the individual, and the ways in which he or she learns about their cultural context, through the mediation of signs and tools. Here a study of career and HE choice would focus on a detailed examination of the language used in career guidance interviews. In considering a study of the cultural interpretation, I was faced with similar questions as those posed by scaffolding. For example, does this interpretation encourage people generally to conform to their cultural norms and practices? Again this did not seem to serve my interest in the possibility of change.

Writers from a situated perspective bring a third interpretation to the concept of ZPD, which is termed collectivist or societal. In distinct contrast to the first two interpretations that focus on the dyad of the individual and his or her teacher, these collectivist interpretations focus on what people can learn as part of communities via participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning



occurs by participation in communities and, perhaps most interestingly in relation to my own interests and commitments, these communities have the capacity to change over the course of time. In addition, Engeström (1995; 2001) focuses on activity systems and their capacity to change over time. Because of this emphasis on change and my commitment to the promotion of equality of opportunity and social justice, I decided to focus on the collectivist interpretation of the ZPD, situated approaches to learning and activity theory in relation to career and issues of HE choice.

Having considered the three different interpretations of the ZPD emanating from the work of Vygotsky, I will now move on to critically evaluate a range of literature relevant to the study, by taking a questioning approach to the issue of realism in career guidance, particularly in relation to HE choice. This fundamental issue is one that continually poses questions and raises dilemmas for career guidance practitioners and will provide a useful tool for critical analysis. In addition, the students in the study raised the issue of realism in relation to their HE choices many times, as they sought reassurance regarding their chances of success. Throughout I will also seek to make comparisons between a range of theoretical perspectives and collectivist interpretations of Vygotsky's ZPD, in order both to draw out similarities and differences between them, and to point to new insights that situated perspectives could bring to issues of HE choice.

### **Realism, who decides?**

Since the establishment of career guidance services following the Employment and Training Act of 1973, career guidance practitioners have wrestled with issues of realism as an integral part of their role. From their inception, career guidance services were tasked with helping young people to make informed, realistic decisions about their futures, and since then Careers Advisers have continually been faced with questions regarding issues of realism in their work with clients. The fundamental question in this respect and the one that this



review seeks to debate is, who ultimately decides what is realistic for a particular client?

The chapter will continue with a consideration of the three key theoretical strands identified on page 10 in relation to realism, through a critical evaluation of the following relevant issues. The first is whether ultimately the individual decides what is realistic for him or her, through his or her own agency (research question 1). The second considers the impact of society, and questions how much society plays a part in influencing the choices people make, and how far realistic decisions are merely a replica of society's norms (research question 2). The third relates to government policy, and whether realistic decisions are those brought about by social engineering that fall into line with government targets (also research question 2). The fourth concerns the relationship between individual agency and society, and what a collectivist interpretation of the ZPD concept, situated learning and activity theory may have to offer to the debate (research question 3). Later on some recommendations for practice will be made in the final chapter (research question 4, see pages 159 to 161).

In relation to HE choice, similar issues regarding realism are apparent. Is a realistic decision in relation to university choice what the individual student aspires to and desires? Is it in line with the norms that society promulgates? Is it what the government seeks to achieve through policy? And how might these different positions interact with one another in relation to HE choice? None of these questions have simple, straightforward answers. In fact consideration of many of them raises even more questions, as other issues (such as how to promote equality of opportunity) surface. At times these issues directly contradict one another and point to the inherently "conflictual nature of social practice" as described by Lave and Wenger, (1991, p.49), which in turn can lead to the double bind which is discussed by Engeström (1987). This inevitably faces Careers Advisers with ongoing tensions and dilemmas, which

they have to try to work through as part of their everyday professional practice with their clients.

Throughout the rest of the chapter I will use the story of a young man, who I shall call Jimmy, in order to illustrate my own understandings of realism and the many challenges it poses in relation to career guidance practice. I came across this story when I was working as a Careers Adviser in inner London in the late 1980s, in an office situated approximately two miles away from the sixth form college, in which I undertook the study. At that time it was standard practice to keep client records for ten years, after which they were shredded. Jimmy was 25 years old and his records were about to be destroyed, when a member of staff drew them to my attention. Extracts from Jimmy's story are included in the rest of the chapter to shed light onto issues of realism and career guidance practice.

### **Realism – does the individual decide?**

Jimmy's story begins with his career guidance interview at school when he is 15 years old. Jimmy is passionate about snooker and he "seems to think that he has a future as a professional snooker player" (paraphrase from Jimmy's case notes, written in approximately 1977). Snooker is the only thing that Jimmy enjoys, and he is determined to succeed as a professional. He spends all his time practising in the local snooker hall and is regularly absent from school. As a result, he is unlikely to gain many academic qualifications. So who decides whether or not Jimmy's aim to become a professional snooker player is realistic? Does he decide this through his own ambition and agency (research question 1)?

Individual agency is described by Bruner (1996) as "the sense that one can initiate and carry out activities on one's own" (p.35) and has been an important theme in literature about career (Killeen, 1996). The work of Rogers (1965) on client-centredness is seen as central to ethical career guidance practice, with

the needs, wants and wishes of the client being central to the process. This is not meant to imply that the context of the client is ignored, but rather that the client is encouraged to manage their issues and difficulties through adopting a variety of strategies.

For many people in helping professions (including career guidance) the work of Egan (1998) is also seen as central, and provides a client-centred model for effective helping through problem solving. Egan's model is described in three stages, with Stage One focusing on the client's current position, Stage Two on the preferred scenario and Stage Three on strategies for action. Throughout, the client is kept at the centre of the process and any action identified is for the client to carry out in pursuit of his or her goals. It is important to emphasise that Egan's model is not a linear one, where the client progresses neatly from one stage to the next, but is designed to be used flexibly to the benefit of the client. In describing the three stage model, Egan refers to three steps involved in each of the three stages, but emphasises that "the steps are not steps in a mechanistic "now do this" sense ... they are activities that help clients develop answers to the questions posed" (p.27). Hence in Egan's work there is some emphasis both on activity on the part of the client in the process, and on the client's construction of a way forward. Through their own agency, the client helps himself or herself with the support of a helper in a problem-management process.

Client-centredness is seen as one of the cornerstones of ethical career guidance practice, and the establishment of the Connexions service in England has highlighted meeting individual need through keeping the young person at the centre as one of its key principles (DfES, 2003). However, despite this, career guidance practitioners are constantly faced with situations that threaten to undermine this. The target driven Connexions service and strategy is a prime example of this, where the drive to lower the numbers of young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) can be seen as paramount

over the wishes of the young people they are seeking to engage. Other challenges to client-centredness, which are of a more subtle nature, also present themselves in relation to the promotion of equality of opportunity, such as, what happens when the wishes of clients fall within the stereotypical norms of society? In Chapter 3 on page 77 I describe the time early on in my professional life when I met Sonia. From a client-centred perspective, Sonia was clearly within her rights to dismiss a career in law on the grounds of her ethnicity. But as a Careers Adviser both interested in, and required to promote equality of opportunity, I was faced with a dilemma and the question, where did this leave me? What happens when the wishes and needs of clients simply reinforce society's discriminatory barriers and practices?

In describing his three stage model, Egan (1998) purports that there is a "gap between the current scenario ... and the preferred scenario" (p.29) and a skilled helper can facilitate a process, which enables the individual to move forward in their thinking about issues or problems, thereby bridging the gap. By the end of the process, the client will know and understand more about their situation and themselves than they did at the beginning. This gap could be seen to mirror Vygotsky's ZPD, with the helper enabling the client to make progress within it. The three stages that Egan describes all take place in the context of the helping interaction, and are therefore interpersonal in nature, which suggests that the ZPD in this context relates to all three stages. The Egan model also asks people to draw on things they already know in order to explain their current position, which could be seen to mirror scaffolding erected by the helper onto the learner's current knowledge and experience, when interpreting the ZPD from the perspective of the individual (Wood, 1998).

When thinking about career, other writers have also used the notion of gaps to describe the career guidance and decision making processes, and these descriptions could be said to resonate with descriptions of the ZPD. One example is the work of Peterson et al (1996), who trace the origins of their



information processing approach to career guidance back to Parsons' (1909) early work on trait factor matching. Here again the client is at the centre of the process and uses true reasoning in order to integrate self-knowledge and occupational knowledge. They then go on to describe their cognitive information processing (CIP) approach to career choice, where a career problem is described as "A gap between an existing state of indecision and a more desired state of decidedness" (p.427). Peterson et al then put forward ways in which career counsellors can help clients to develop goals in order to remove the gap. They emphasise that a breadth and depth of cognitive processing is required in career decision-making and that the process involves affective elements, as well as the "evolution of higher-order executive control processes" (pp.430–431). They outline a five-step process of communication, analysis, synthesis, valuing and execution (CASVE), with a return to communication at the end of the cycle, in order to evaluate the decision.

Peterson et al's work presents both challenges and difficulties to career guidance practitioners. The emphasis again is on individual agency, and the capacity of people to engage in high level analysis and evaluation. Questions immediately arise when, for a range of good reasons, clients are simply unable to do this. The students in the study appear well placed to think at this level, as they have all achieved in school and are hoping to progress onto high level courses. However, at times they may have emotional or health difficulties that may prevent them from being able to think things through in this systematic way (research question 2). Equally other young people, who are NEET may not have been able to develop the analytical skills needed to carry out the process effectively.

Cochran (1985) is another example of a writer from the field of career that refers to the notion of gaps. When writing about a narrative approach to career, Cochran (ibid) views a career problem as a "gap between what is and what ought to be" (p.145). This again resonates with descriptions of the ZPD

and in this context the role of the Careers Adviser becomes one of enabling the client to make progress from what is, to what ought to be, via a process of meaning making through the client's construction of narratives. Cochran sees the client as an agent and the author of their narrative career (research question 1). Again questions arise regarding how far an individual can have a say in the construction of their narrative in relation to career. The students in the study at first sight may appear well placed to do this, but as well as selecting universities, universities will also be selecting them. In fact it could be that the universities through their selection processes will have a very real impact on important aspects of their career narrative.

In this section a range of theoretical approaches to career that place the individual agent as central (research question 1) have been considered. The question regarding how far individuals decide what is realistic for them in relation to career is still unclear. Is Jimmy's aim to become a professional snooker player realistic? Jimmy shows high levels of agency and is determined to succeed. From his case notes, Jimmy's interview could not be described as client-centred, in that it appeared to focus on the barriers in place, rather than his needs, wishes and aspirations. There certainly appears to be a gap between his current position as a young man who regularly plays snooker, and his preferred scenario of being a professional player. From the point of view of his agency, it is by no means certain that Jimmy will be a professional player in the future, and it could be that other factors will also have a part to play. The next section moves on to look at societal issues and the influence they have on career, and the story of Jimmy will be continued.

### **Realism – what impact does society have?**

In this section the question of realism and how far society and its norms restrict career choice and development is considered (research question 2). The section begins with another extract from Jimmy's story, and then moves on to consider the work of Roberts and Hodgkinson and his associates. Following

this, literature that relates to HE choice is critically evaluated in relation to societal factors, and the section concludes with some more thoughts on Jimmy's position.

Jimmy lives on a council estate and is from what could be described as an ordinary working class background. His attendance at his comprehensive school in Tooting, south London is sporadic. Jimmy does not enjoy school, as he finds most of what he does there boring and irrelevant to his goal of becoming a professional snooker player. There are rumours that his headmaster lets him practice snooker in the afternoons, in return for attending school in the mornings. Jimmy cannot read and write well by the time he leaves school. Most professional snooker players are very much older than Jimmy, but this does not seem to deter him from his goal. In many respects Jimmy does not appear to conform to society's idea of a professional snooker player (calm, measured, well educated), as Jimmy's temperament is fiery and quick. Will society's views of professional snooker present Jimmy with too many barriers to overcome?

The work of Roberts (1977, 1993) was highlighted earlier in this chapter on page 24 as an example of an opportunity structures approach to career, where the structures of society (in particular the variables of class, race and gender) are said to have a greater effect on career choice than the wishes of the individual. Over time Roberts developed his ideas, as he witnessed the prolonged transitions that young people experience between school and work. The work of Roberts poses questions around the extent to which an individual can have control over their future and the impact of societal factors on career (research question 2), and raises issues regarding the ways in which society might change in order to integrate people (Maranda and Comeau, 2000).

More recently the work of Hodgkinson and his associates has done much to bring the polar opposites of self and society together (research question 3).



From their study of young people taking part in the Training Credits scheme, Hodkinson et al (1996) developed their theory of career decision making, entitled careership. The concept of careership has three dimensions, which are described as being “completely interlocked” (p.3). The first is choices of lifestyle, the second is individual progression over time, and the third relates to social interactions with others who can be seen as having some influence on the process.

Within the first dimension, choices of lifestyle, it is argued that decisions are always made within social settings, and drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, Hodkinson et al (1996) argue that people “cannot ... act or think other than as a person of a particular gender, race, class, nation, etc., living in a particular period of time.” (p.146). This results in ‘dispositions’ (which could be described as leanings towards certain things and against others) that are both individual and subjective. These subjective dispositions are located within the objective structures of society, which may often result in individuals who tend to conform to societal norms. The subjective and the objective interact with one another in that “change in culture affects the individual, and change in an individual contributes to change or continuity in culture” (p.146). The students in the study are people in a social context, but do they appear to be making their decisions in line with their dispositions based on societal norms, or are they also considering other options that might extend beyond what would normally be expected of them?

Drawing on the work of Giddens (1991) the writers are quick to point to clear inequalities that exist within society, which restrict choices for many (research question 2). The dispositions of many people, particularly those who experience some kind of disadvantage, will lead them to conclude “someone like me does not or cannot do X”, as cultural messages are internalised. It appears that many individuals internalise society's messages, which affect their view of the world and their possible future and can lead them to conclude that



opportunities are limited by society's norms. Most of the students in the study are from ethnic minorities and have little family history of HE, so how does this appear to affect their HE choices? Are they concluding that people like them do not go to university, or only go to particular universities? Or are they actively considering breaking the mould?

The second dimension, transformations of identity and individual progression, is again seen in relation to the person's habitus, and their circumstances, which change over time. These changes can come about as a result of individual choice or by force of circumstance, often at particular 'turning points'.

Individual progression is seen as "constrained and enabled by the social and cultural conditions in which a person lives, which are, in turn, influenced by the actions of that individual." (Hodkinson et al, 1996, p.147). Some will no doubt experience more constraints than others, giving them a greater or lesser degree of choice in their progression. What kinds of constraints are the students in this study experiencing and how might these hamper their progression?

Because choices of lifestyle are made in a social context, the third dimension of interactions with others then comes to the fore. In relation to choices, Hodkinson et al's (1996) study showed that it was not only the young people that made choices to take part in a particular training programme, but also that the training providers and employers made decisions too, in accepting or rejecting a young person for training. Here again society's structures become prominent, as decisions made may often fall in line with what would normally be expected. As far as students in this study are concerned, as well as choosing universities, universities will also choose them, and it would be interesting to see how far the choices made by universities conform to the norms as revealed by statistics of ethnic minority students in HE.

The concept of pragmatic rationality is used to describe the decision making process of the young people interviewed by Hodkinson et al (1996), and is markedly different from previous models of decision making that can be seen to mirror technical rationality. Pragmatic rationality is “grounded in the culture and the identities of the young people” (p.123). The young people made their decisions in line with their “horizons for action” (p.123), which were formed by notions they had about themselves combined with knowledge of the opportunities around them, and their perceptions from their life histories regarding what they felt they could achieve. Pragmatic rationality then is not merely based on the individual self, or on society, but encapsulates both (research question 3). How far the students in my study are making their decisions based on pragmatic rationality might be difficult to tell, because of its short-term nature. A longitudinal study, following the students over a longer period of time (e.g. in HE) may or may not produce data that shows this.

By the end of their work *Triumphs and Tears*, the position of Hodkinson et al (1996) in relation to self and society is made clear. In spite of “the evidence of deep-seated inequalities in the youth labour market in Britain” and their criticisms of studies of this in relation to their “implicit determinism”, they conclude “our work does nothing to challenge the patterns described and is wholly congruent with them. Our model of careership presents a view of the mechanisms by which such inequalities are perpetuated, whilst recognising scope for individual choice and change.” (p.154). Self and society are seen as interconnected (research question 3), but overall, the picture presented is one of society in self, where patterns of stereotyping and discrimination are perpetuated, and where individuals make choices in line with their habitus, which generally conform to society’s norms. Hodkinson et al, are not arguing that this is how it should be, but simply that this is what their findings show from the data they gathered.

Within the context of this review, Hodkinson et al's (1996) study is important as the concepts of careership, horizons for action and pragmatic rationality have brought the individual and society together to the point where they cannot be viewed as separate (research question 3). However, the apparently dominant influences of society and its structures raise a number of important questions and dilemmas for this study, and for guidance practitioners more generally. Hodkinson et al's findings suggest that overall, society is a more dominant influence than the individual in relation to career choice, as in the majority of cases the young people that they studied responded to their circumstances in a pragmatic way. In most cases these actions tended to force the young people to conform to the norms of society. If this is the case, this then poses the question of what role, if any, guidance can play in challenging society and its stereotypes. Working to government contracts guidance practitioners are required to promote equal opportunities yet, after examining Hodkinson et al's work, I am left questioning how careership can help career guidance practitioners as they seek to fulfill this requirement.

Hodkinson et al's work can be criticised for its under-emphasis on individual agency. Although it is mentioned and there seems to be some scope for individual choice, it is by no means a strong feature in their argument, and the influences of society are seen to be far greater in guiding the decisions that people make. This raises the question, are the students in my study showing evidence of individual agency (research question 1) or do they seem to be responding to societal messages (research question 2)? Horizons for action are described as being both subjective (individual) and objective (structural): how far can an individual's own agency influence these? On a physical level, horizons at a given point are static, but appear to move as the individual moves. Moving forward usually means that the horizon in view also moves forward and extends so that more of the landscape comes into view. Climbing to a height means that the horizon extends further into the distance. Standing in front of a mountain means that the horizon becomes much closer. Adverse



weather conditions like fog can mean that a horizon is temporarily obscured. Hodkinson et al do take note of movement in relation to horizons for action when considering transformations of identity and individual progression, but taking the metaphor of horizons further, it should be asked can an individual's horizons for action be extended in any way by individual movement, or by the removal of barriers?

It is also worth comparing and contrasting Hodkinson et al's concept of horizons for action with the ZPD. The ZPD, like horizons for action is both subjective and objective. The young people in Hodkinson et al's study made their decisions in line with their horizons for action, and responded to situations within the scope that their horizons for action gave them. It is as if their horizons for action set some kind of limit on what they felt they could do. By contrast, the ZPD has a focus on development, where the limits are not preset, but where the individual through learning by participation can develop, possibly outside the usual expectations of society. The ZPD might point to a role for career guidance practitioners in relation to promoting equal opportunities by encouraging participation. Like horizons for action, the ZPD relates to individuals who are inseparable from their social context, but from a collectivist viewpoint, individuals who join collectives may be in a stronger position to effect change from within, than the individual alone. This is explored further on pages 56 to 73.

In his later work in partnership with Bloomer, Hodkinson develops the notion of the learning career, following a longitudinal study of young people in further education (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). This work again serves to bring self and society together (research question 3), and in his article on theoretical considerations, Bloomer (2001) considers other approaches, as well as those of Bourdieu (1977), which facilitate this. These include both social constructivism and situated approaches (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which have influenced their work.



The particular emphasis in Bloomer and Hodkinson's later study of Stokingham College is an examination of "the social nature of learning from a different angle" (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000, p.188), namely the ways in which dispositions to learning are transformed over time. This notion is particularly interesting, as it seems to denote some movement of the individual in relation to their context. Context here is not seen as static, and this is particularly evident in Amanda Ball's story, where she withdrew from college in response to her changing circumstances, in particular her boyfriend's illness. However, after reading Amanda's story, I am again left with questions as to how far Amanda simply responded to her circumstances, which were certainly unpredictable and largely outside her control. Was she in essence unable to respond in any other way, or did she simply choose not to do so? She certainly appears to have suffered to an extent at the hands of conflicting academic subjects and teachers: namely philosophy, which encouraged her to question things, and English where she felt she had to comply with the ideas of the teacher, both of which could have been factors in the choices she made. But equally her circumstances appear to have been major drivers at the various turning points in her story. However, with little support, for example from family, it could be argued that she had no other choice. Here again, society seems to remain the dominant influence.

Another particularly interesting aspect of the study is its focus on issues of culture and learning, especially the ways in which the students interviewed saw and experienced the college, its people and processes. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) describe the college as having a "positive culture for learning" (p.191), and this could highlight an important aspect in relation to my own study, where the college's culture is described by the Careers Coordinator as one of "intensive support". Possible interpretations of this are considered in Chapter 4 together with the ways in which a positive learning culture can be fostered within formal career guidance, which may in turn enhance learning about HE choice (research question 4).

The work of Hodgkinson and his associates can be seen as playing a key role in bringing self and society together in relation to career (research question 3). Overall, however, the influences of society appear far greater, and as Bloomer (2001) suggests “despite a compelling sense of agency in young people’s accounts, there were patterns in their behaviour which suggested they were not entirely the free-choosing agents many supposed themselves to be” (p.434). Having examined the work of Hodgkinson and his associates, I will now move on to critically evaluate literature on HE choice, again within the context of realism.

In literature about HE choice, issues of access, equality and widening participation are apparent, and this literature raises a number of key questions as to how students make their HE choice, and these relate to research question 2 on page 5. The work of Reay et al (2001) is particularly relevant to this study, as it focuses specifically on HE choice, the ways in which choices were made and the factors at work in the decision making process of students. The study was carried out in institutions in and around London and concentrated on students who were from non-traditional backgrounds, some of whom were from ethnic minorities. My own study is also located in London, examines issues of HE choice and focuses on six students from non-traditional backgrounds, five of whom are from ethnic minorities.

However, it is also important to emphasise some key differences between the studies, particularly in relation to the ethnic minority students who participated in them. It is a mistake to suggest that people from ethnic minorities can be categorised together in one homogenous group. Studies that report in this way (Bird, 1996) tend to paint a positive picture of increasing numbers of ethnic minority students gaining entry to university. However, as Reay et al (2001) point out, when statistics are broken down, particular groups of ethnic minority students seem to fare particularly badly, namely students of black Caribbean and black African origin, with male black Caribbean students being



particularly under-represented (Bhattacharyya et al, 2003). More general statistics can hide this, as students from other ethnic minorities (e.g. Asian and Chinese) fare much better than their white counterparts: this serves to adjust the overall figures for ethnic minority students. In Reay et al's study, four out of fifty three students interviewed are said to be African, and there is no mention of any who are black Caribbean. This contrasts with my own study, for although it considers a much smaller sample of six students, one is white British, two are black African and three are black Caribbean. It seems fair to say that my study has a focus on those students from ethnic minorities who seem to fare particularly badly in the HE choice stakes. Reay et al's work raises some important issues, which prompt some key questions in relation to my own study, which will now be explored.

The first issue is what Reay et al describe as "localism" (p.861) and the desire of some students to remain close to home and its support structures, particularly financial support. Are the students in my study also influenced by this, and are they also choosing to study in local institutions, and if so, why? This links to students' ideas of a sense of place within their horizons for action (Hodkinson et al, 1996) and the right place for them to study. In the process students ask themselves questions such as "will I fit in here? Is this a good place for me? Can I see myself studying here?" etc. Are the students in my study asking themselves such questions, and, if so, how are they trying to reach conclusions?

Reay et al describe the notion of 'the good university' and argue that it is both "racialised and classed" (p.865). What constitutes a good university for an individual varies and connects with ideas of the student's sense of place as outlined above, although issues of league tables and more general messages are taken into account as well. In a paradoxical Reay et al's study shows that some students choose certain universities because they feel they will fit in, as there will be numbers of students there who are like them (e.g. from ethnic

minorities, mature etc.) Conversely others avoid choosing certain universities because they feel they do not want to study with others who are like them, as they see these places as being somehow inferior. Reay et al describe this as being “caught up in a process of dis-identification from their current social positioning” (p.867). These students appear to have internalised certain derogatory messages about particular universities, which are based on issues of class and race. However, if the institutions to which they apply then turn down such students, this can serve to confirm further the view that this kind of university is not for people like them.

This links with Engeström’s (1987) notion of the double bind, discussed on page 66 and appears to consolidate the position of ethnic minority students in new universities in urban areas. For example, black students may decide they want to study at these institutions because they feel they will fit in. Others choose older universities because of their reputation, and because they do not wish to study in a university with lots of other black students. However, statistics show that students from ethnic minorities gain fewer A’ Level points (Bhattacharyya et al, 2003). These students may therefore be in a position of also having to apply to universities requiring fewer points, such as new universities in urban areas. When they either get rejected or fail to gain the A’ Level points needed for a place at an older university, they go to new universities in urban areas. Either way, black students go to new universities in urban areas via the double bind. Again this raises questions for me in relation to the ways in which students in my study are making their choices. Do they want to study with people like them, or is it a case of the opposite? Are they too trying to dis-identify themselves from their current social positions, or do they want to affirm them? How does this relate to their horizons for action (Hodkinson et al, 1996)?

Writing about the same study, Ball et al (2002) argue that the work shows that “the perceptions, distinctions and choices of HE institutions used and made by



students play a part in re-constituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in HE. It is in this way that they 'do' or embody social structures. In effect, this is social class 'in the head'" (p.52). They point to the fact that they have "also drawn on Hodgkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theory of 'careership' and their notion of 'pragmatically rational decision making'." (p.52). Ball et al point to two strands of thinking on the part of students making HE choices. The first is termed "cognitive performative" and describes the ways in which students try and match their academic performance and potential to the complex requirements of different institutions (e.g. points tariffs). The second strand is "social/cultural" and relates to how students see themselves in relation to universities, which can serve to confirm structural inequalities and stereotypes. For example, 'people like me study at university X, so I choose X' and what society believes is confirmed. In this way "Choices are made within differently delimited 'opportunity structures' (Roberts, 1993) and different 'horizons for action'" (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p.55). Here again society appears to be the dominant influence (research question 2).

In considering the role of individual agency, both Reay et al (2001) and Ball et al (2002) identify ways in which structural issues can become internalised in the minds of students, which in turn can mean that their own agency positively contributes to the maintenance of societal norms. In the self and society debate, this tends to put the focus on society, with self being at best influenced by society or at worst the puppet or mirror of society. For me again this is problematic, for if guidance practitioners are required to promote equal opportunities, how can they do so when such perspectives seem to consolidate the position of society in self, which, as they argue themselves can be seen to be dominated by stereotypes and assumptions about what people do? What part, then, does individual agency play (research question 1)? Are students in my study making their decisions simply by choosing what they feel society allows them to access? Or does their individual agency sometimes lead them

to different conclusions? Can this agency then lead them into situations that society would conceive as outside the norm? If this were the case, their horizons for action could then be broadened and widened, and stereotypes could be challenged.

Having considered literature in relation to HE choice, I will conclude by returning to Jimmy's story. On the surface Jimmy appears to be an unlikely candidate for professional snooker. His choices of lifestyle and the decisions he is making are situated in his white, working class, south London context, and this context shows some clear inequalities in relation to Jimmy's prospects. Despite these inequalities, Jimmy does make some progress towards his goal and his dispositions remain towards snooker. Through participation he begins to interact with more people in the world of snooker, and as a result opportunities begin to open up to him. He does not appear to be limited by his horizons for action, but is gaining experience and making progress towards his goal. Whether or not his goal is realistic, is still debatable.

### **Realism – what influence does government policy have?**

Having considered the impact of agency and society, in this section we continue with Jimmy's story and consider the impact of government policy on issues of realism in relation to career.

Jimmy attended school in the 1970s, and it is interesting to speculate about the ways in which current government policy would affect Jimmy if he were at school today. Jimmy did not attend school regularly and the current Connexions service would no doubt focus its attention on Jimmy as a young person in the NEET group, in need of special help to enable him to become engaged in education, employment or training. He might well have an intensive support Personal Adviser, whose job it is to work with a small number of young people like Jimmy towards the goal of removing them from



the NEET figures. It is difficult to know how Jimmy's rumoured informal arrangement of attending school in the mornings and being allowed to play snooker in the afternoons would be viewed today. It could be seen as training towards his goal, in which case the arrangement could be formalised into some kind of extended work experience (assuming the manager of the snooker hall would agree to this), or it could be viewed as irrelevant leisure time, in which case Jimmy would be offered other seemingly more productive alternatives, perhaps in a local FE college. If the former were the case, Jimmy could continue making progress towards his aim, but if the latter were the case, it could actively work against Jimmy's ambitions.

The current government's policy on widening participation in HE and its Aimhigher initiatives are particularly relevant to my study, as many of the students in the sixth form college do not have a family history of HE. The DfES Aimhigher website states that "The Government's aim is to increase participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18-30, by the end of the decade. Also, to make significant progress year on year towards fair access, and to bear down on rates of non-completion. If this is to happen, it is critical that more of our young people who come from families with no background in HE are able to enter universities and other institutions." Aimhigher operates in five different strands, offering funding to support activities in schools, FE colleges and HE institutions to encourage participation, along with a publicity campaign and some extra financial support for students in the form of a number of bursaries.

Government policy in the form of the Aimhigher initiative has a clear relationship to realism, in that on one level it appears that the government is saying that by 2010 it will be realistic for up to 50% of all 18-30 year olds to aim for a place in HE. However, is it really that simple? The quotation above from the Aimhigher website also points to other more problematic issues, such as retention and achievement. Whilst it may be possible for 50% of people to

gain a place in HE, HE institutions will then be faced with large numbers of people from very varied backgrounds, who are likely to need greater levels of both academic and personal support in order to stay the course and achieve their qualifications. Many institutions are working hard to develop a much greater range of programmes both academic and vocational at sub degree level to cater for the needs of such future students (e.g. foundation degrees). HE no longer only caters for people who want to gain an honours degree, but there are stopping off points along the way, that enable students to exit with a qualification at a point that suits them.

Government policy today is often accompanied by marketing, which some see as 'spin' and the Aimhigher initiative is no exception to this. Although the case for a better-qualified, flexible workforce has been made (Edwards 1993) there is no evidence to suggest an increase in the number of job vacancies specifically for graduates. Although the national unemployment rate amongst graduates remains roughly 2% below that of non-graduates, a degree alone is not enough to secure someone a graduate level entry job. "Despite all these potential benefits, a degree is not a guarantee to a good job. In selecting employees, employers will look at what else graduates have to offer, including their skills, work experience (providing desirable commercial awareness) and overall potential. Quite simply, a degree is not enough on its own." (Graduate Prospects, 2004). By contrast the Aimhigher website encourages prospective students with the following words. "Everyone has dreams and whatever your dream career, one thing is for sure - going into higher education (HE) to study will help make your dreams a reality. It will open up more possibilities than you imagined possible, and you'll have the time of your life into the bargain! ... Whether you're still at school, in work or unemployed, Aimhigher shows you how HE can improve your career prospects and help you find your dream job. With a vast range of courses, and many different ways of studying, we help you choose the direction that's just right for you." (DfES Aimhigher website).



Although it appears that a lot is being done to encourage people into HE from non-traditional backgrounds, there are other policy initiatives that could be seen to be working in direct opposition to those seeking to widen participation. One example here is the introduction of top up fees. Although the government is always quick to point out that those from less well off families will still receive support, the overriding message that comes across is one of mounting student debt, and there is no guarantee that getting a degree then will automatically give access to better paid work. Careers Advisers can often find themselves in the midst of such dilemmas in their work with prospective HE students.

Widening participation in HE is one key arm of the government's strategy for a well-qualified workforce that is better able to compete in global markets. This particular strategy is not one that would affect Jimmy, as he is hoping to leave education behind as soon as possible. Having considered issues of realism and HE choice from the perspective of the individual, society and government policy, the remainder of the chapter turns to the work of Vygotsky and those who follow after him, who interpret the ZPD from a collectivist standpoint, and it considers what their work might have to offer to the debate. The story of Jimmy also continues.

### **Situated approaches to learning**

In this section we return to the work of Vygotsky, and in particular to the work of those after him who seek to interpret the ZPD from a collectivist standpoint. The story of Jimmy continues and is concluded, along with an examination of situated approaches to learning and activity theory.

Jimmy appears to be an unlikely professional snooker player, but is nonetheless making progress towards his aim. He still spends most of his time in the local snooker hall and is learning by participation in the community of practice of snooker. Jimmy is given open access to the community of practice

by both fellow players and the manager of the snooker hall. He begins to play competitions and exhibition matches, and his talent for the game is evident. He is changing from a young man who hangs around in snooker halls and plays and observes lots of games of snooker, to a serious player with a possible future as a professional.

In this section we will consider situated approaches to learning, and what they might have to offer to understandings about realism, career and HE choice. Such approaches have been developed by such writers as Rogoff (1990) and Lave and Wenger (1991) and draw on the work of Vygotsky. They serve to extend understanding of learning beyond the traditional pedagogy of the dyad of the learner and the teacher to participation in collectives and communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that "Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind" (p. 15). Within this participation framework, individuals learn by participating with others in activities that are culturally situated. As a result of experiences gained through participation in the social and cultural world, individuals discover meanings and construct knowledge through negotiation with others. Within the framework of participation, "understanding and experience are in constant interaction – indeed are mutually constitutive" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.15). The individual agent, his or her experiences and the social world are all brought together and are interdependent (research question 3). From this perspective the individual is seen as "person-in-the-world" (p.52), where the individual and society cannot be viewed as separate. The two "are mutually involved to an extent that precludes regarding them as independently definable." (Rogoff, 1990, p.28).

As discussed on page 36 the nature of social practice is "conflictual" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.49) and these conflicts are the very things that can bring about change. This notion could be particularly helpful when considering aspects of career guidance practice and HE choice. For example, where self



and society are inseparable certain situations will arise where the two will be in direct conflict with one another. As discussed on page 38 this is evident when thinking of issues of realism and client-centredness. It is important to understand when considering issues of realism and career guidance that working with an agenda of social inclusion, does not mean working with an agenda of normalisation, where people are simply encouraged to conform to society's expectations. Indeed, it could be argued that unless conflicts between self and society arise, the status quo will remain and nothing will change. For students in the study, unless there is some conflict between their view of their future and those of society, opportunities will remain restricted to those whose faces are seen to fit, thereby promoting stereotyping. In this sense continuities need to be replaced by discontinuities, so that change can happen. As promoters of equal opportunities, perhaps such discontinuities should indeed be welcome to career guidance practitioners.

Where self and society merge, and learning happens via participation, two other key aspects are worthy of note. Firstly, learning by participation involves the whole person, and, as a result of participation, people change. Here, "Learning ... implies becoming a different person" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.53). Secondly, as people participate in communities, so the community itself is transformed over time, as cultural practices adapt and change as new meanings and knowledge are generated. Communities of practice therefore are not static, but they change in the light of the experiences of those participating within them. When students, such as those in the study, participate in HE, the community of practice of HE will change over time.

Central to Lave and Wenger's (1991) work is the concept of legitimate peripheral participation that they developed whilst undertaking anthropological studies of apprenticeships in different geographical and cultural contexts. This concept provides a means of analysing and understanding different ways in which learning takes place, where the focus is on learning by participation in

the social world. Legitimate peripheral participation is “a process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” (p.29). They observed that within a community of practice, beginners participate on the periphery, through such activities as observation and practice. Gradually over time, they begin to participate more fully, moving towards a position of full participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners” (p.29), and that “learning through legitimate peripheral participation takes place no matter which educational form provides a context for learning” (p.40). In other words, where people are in communities of practitioners, learning will inevitably take place via participation, irrespective of the culture or setting.

Using this analytical framework, the students in the study can be seen to be participants in the sixth form college who wish to gain entry into the community of practice of HE. Being part of the community of practice of the college, means that they will learn through participation. However, it is clear that the students have very little access to participation in the HE system, and this is problematic, as access to learning is then denied. A vital role for guidance in this respect is to enable students to think through various aspects of university life that they cannot yet experience directly. HE visits and fairs provide the students with “boundary encounters ... which are single or discrete events that provide connections” (Tuomi-Gröhn et al, 2003), which help them to envisage their possible future in HE, and hopefully ultimately gain access. More opportunities to participate in HE as offered by some of the Aimhigher initiatives, could facilitate more learning. The ZPD can be seen as the difference between self with history (the student in the sixth form college) and self with possibility (the student at university) as described by Bruner (1996). In this sense it offers a holistic picture of the possible development of individuals in their social context, as they become different people (research question 3).



Reflecting Lave and Wenger's (1991) view that learning involves the whole person, the view of the ZPD adopted in this study is holistic and is used as a way of describing the students' potential to learn about themselves and HE choice, which is revealed through participation in activities that are culturally situated. This development of the whole person is graphically illustrated by the metaphor of dots that Tommy uses, as described in Chapter 4 on pages 108 to 120. For each individual this learning potential will be different, and indeed it will be different for the individual themselves at different times in their lives. The ZPD here is viewed as a construct that can aid further understanding of how students learn about themselves and HE choice within the guidance process, and the study seeks to evaluate the concept of the ZPD as a way of describing and interpreting the learning of students, in order to gain new perspectives and understandings. The ZPD here is defined as the difference between what students can achieve alone, and what they can achieve by participation in culturally situated activities with a Careers Adviser, thus enabling them to become different people. The data is examined in order to seek to describe the difference between students' career thinking before seeing a Careers Adviser, and afterwards.

Lave and Wenger (1991) usefully discuss issues of access to communities of practice, and show ways in which legitimate peripheral participation can promote access by suggesting "an opening, a way of getting access to sources for understanding through growing involvement" (p.37). However, conversely, if participation is for whatever reason denied or restricted, it can serve to inhibit access and learning, or limit it to those who are in some way deemed to be suitable for participation, as shown through Becker's (1972, in Lave and Wenger, 1991) study of butchers. This shows that the denial of access to learning opportunities within a community of practice can inhibit development, and lead to the segregation of tasks and activities. This seems particularly relevant to this study, as all the students are seeking access into the HE community, and some may find access to be more open than others.

Learning by participation in a community per se is one issue, but access and gaining entry to the community of practice is another. Lave and Wenger point to the work of Becker as raising “a serious new set of concerns about the issue of access” and “the conflictual character of access for newcomers, the problems about power and control” (p.86), which they admit lie outside the scope of their studies.

Situated perspectives on learning bring self and society together to the point where they cannot be separated (research question 3). Individuals learn within communities of practice, which are culturally situated and through participation, learners become part of those communities. People within them experience conflicts and differences, and these bring about changes within communities. However, access to communities can be open or restricted through the exercise of power, and situated approaches cannot address issues of transfer from one community to another (Tuomi-Gröhn et al, 2003). In this particular respect, we now need to look to the third generation of activity theory and recent conceptualisations of the ZPD to examine what these might have to offer to a study on HE choice.

### **Activity theory**

In this section the possible contribution of activity theory will be considered, particularly its potential to explain ways in which changes within activity systems come about, along with issues of access, transfer and boundary-crossing. The story of Jimmy also continues.

Jimmy is now actively participating in the community of practice of snooker. The community is open to his participation, and is actively encouraging him to strive for his goal of becoming a professional. The activity system of professional snooker is changing, due to the growing popularity of the game brought about by the advent of colour television and the popular television series Pot Black. Audiences are keen to see up-and-coming young players, and



another young and dynamic professional player, Alex Higgins, is now established on the professional snooker circuit. A young player and close friend who regularly plays with Jimmy at the snooker hall, Tony Meo, is making his way in the professional game too. Together as a collective they are changing the activity system of professional snooker from within. Jimmy has now achieved his goal and is a professional snooker player.

Vygotsky viewed activity on the part of the learner as central, and his work can be described as initiating the first generation of activity theory, with its focus on the individual. Activity theory is described by Cole et al (1997) as “a psychology that takes as its starting point the actions of people participating in routine cultural contexts” (p. 1). Here, culture, through signs and tools, mediates between the subject and the object and, in essence, activity theory “overcame the split between the Cartesian individual and the untouchable societal structure. The individual could no longer be understood without his or her cultural means; the society could no longer be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce artifacts.” (Engeström, 2001, p.134, research question 3).

The weakness in this first generation of activity theory was its focus on the individual, and subsequent work by Leont’ev (Leont’ev, 1981 in Engeström, 2001) made the distinction between individual action and the activity of collectives, and moved activity theory forward into its second generation. Here the focus moved from relationships between individuals to relationships between the individual and the collective.

More recent interpretations of Vygotsky’s work, through the work of writers such as Cole and Engeström, can be seen as giving rise to some of the ideas associated with what is now known as third generation activity theory. Here again activity on the part of the learner is at the heart of the learning process, and this activity is undertaken by individual agents in collectives. In third



generation activity theory these collectives provide the social settings for learning in interactions with others via the medium of language, enabling learners to construct new knowledge. These social settings are both cultural and historical, in the sense that practices and norms emerge over periods of time. Activity theory is often referred to in this regard as cultural-historical activity theory. The emphasis in the third generation of activity theory is on the lateral relationships between collectives, and it is this particular focus that could be useful in this study, as the activity system of the sixth form college interacts with the activity system of HE through the applications of the students.

In the context of third generation activity theory it is important to understand what is meant by the word activity. Ryle (1997) is quick to point out that the underlying concepts behind activity theory are poorly rendered in English by the word activity and, like the ZPD, the concept of activity has been interpreted at different levels, namely two; the level of the individual and the level of society. First, at the level of the individual, or the lower level of activity identified by Leont'ev (1981), individual "action (is) concerned with the pursuit of specific goals" (in Ryle, 1997, p.413). Ryle argues that from the perspective of activity theory "the implication is of high-level, motivated thinking, doing and being of an individual in a given social context" (p.413). As in situated approaches, self here is seen as being in society. Activity does not merely involve doing, but also a whole range of thinking skills, and both doing and thinking encourage and enable the development of self. This occurs over time, as new interpretations are made and language is seen as fundamentally important in shaping the self in society.

However, activity theory also offers other insights, in particular its emphasis on activity systems. At a second societal level, Cole et al (1997) describe activities as "not short-lived events or actions that have a temporally clear-cut beginning and end. They are systems that produce events and actions and

evolve over lengthy periods of sociohistorical time ... The activity system incessantly reconstructs itself through actions and discourse.” (p.4). Activity here can be seen more broadly as the way things are done, embedded in culture, which slowly changes and realigns itself over time. This is the higher level of activity described by Leont’ev as “goals pursued in specific contexts” (in Ryle, 1997, p.413).

Engeström (2001) sees activity taking place within systems that evolve over long periods of time, and argues that they often take the form of institutions or organisations. Figure 2.1. below shows his model of an activity system.

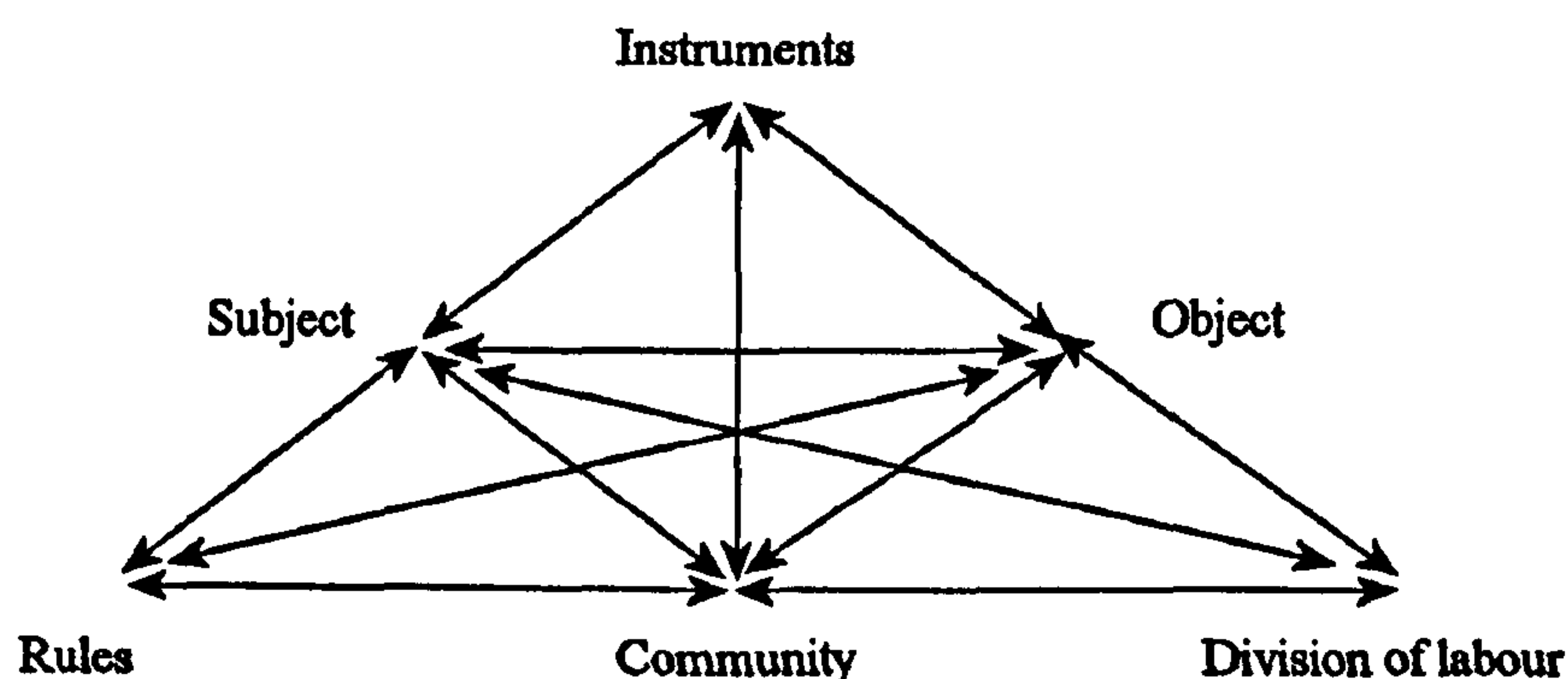


Figure 2.1 An activity system

The students in this study are all participants of the activity system of the sixth form college with its cultural norms and practices, rules and instruments. Engeström depicts an activity system through his triangle model and I have interpreted this in relation to the students in the study as follows. The subject of the system is defined as “the individual or sub-group whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis” (Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Research Work, 2004) and in this analysis it is the individual agent or student in the college (research question 1). The student hopes to gain a place at university (the object that leads to an outcome). The instruments are both internal and external to the student, and can be seen to be the student’s



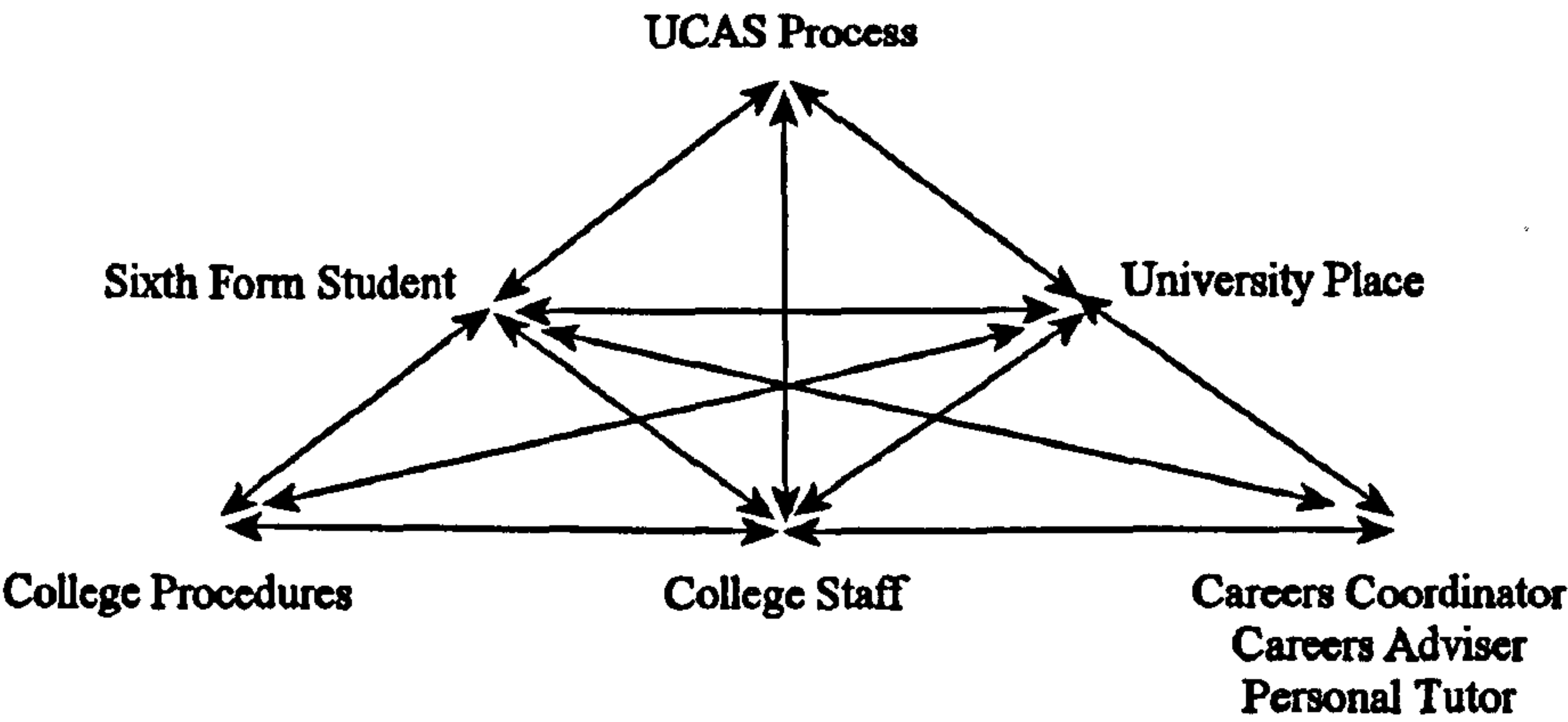


Figure 2.2 The activity system of the Sixth Form College

level of motivation and self-belief and the UCAS process. In order to gain the object, the student also has to obey the rules, seen here as the college’s own procedures (e.g. personal statements completed in Word on a prescribed template). The community, or people who share the same object, are the staff of the college, and the division of labour refers to the different roles people have in relation to the object (e.g. the Careers Adviser helps students decide where to apply, the personal tutors write references and the Careers Coordinator coaches students on writing personal statements.)

This whole system has evolved over a period of time and has changed in small ways as internal contradictions have manifested themselves. For example, the template for personal statements was introduced in order to save time as, prior to this, students completed their statements in a variety of fonts, styles and sizes. However, other changes have been resisted, such as the completion of on-line applications, which it is argued could be lost at the click of a mouse button. This activity system, like many others, changes only slowly, and often over extended periods of time.

Engeström (2001) also argues that activity systems do not exist in isolation, but interact with other systems. In this study, the activity system of the sixth



form college interacts with the HE activity system (as epitomised by a university) in the following way (see Figure 2.3 overleaf).

The HE system (or university) depicted by the triangle on the right has places to offer to students, like those in the sixth form college in the study depicted by the triangle on the left. The university place is the potentially shared object. The subject in the HE system is the admissions tutor, who has to follow the UCAS process in order to gain access to potential students and to follow his or her own institution's processes and procedures for admissions. The community represents the staff of the university, and the division of labour represents people on the staff who may also be involved in the recruitment of students, such as subject specialists and members of student support. On gaining a place and starting a course, the potentially shared object is achieved and the individual student from the sixth form college becomes part of the activity system of HE. He or she gains access to the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where he or she begins to participate and take part in the process of change from within the system.

One key feature of an activity system is its capacity to change as a result of contradictions, which Engeström (2001) describes as "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems." (p.137) As open systems these tensions are often initiated from outside, and can provide the means through which the double bind can be broken. One such example in relation to HE choice is the current government's widening participation agenda. As discussed on pages 54 to 55, universities are expected to recruit students from a variety of different backgrounds(e.g. those students in this study who live in what are known as widening participation postcode areas, or WPPs). Universities responding to this challenge are then faced with contradictions, where responses need to be made in order for these students to be successful within the activity system. For example, many will be unused to studying in a university environment and will not have the support of relatives

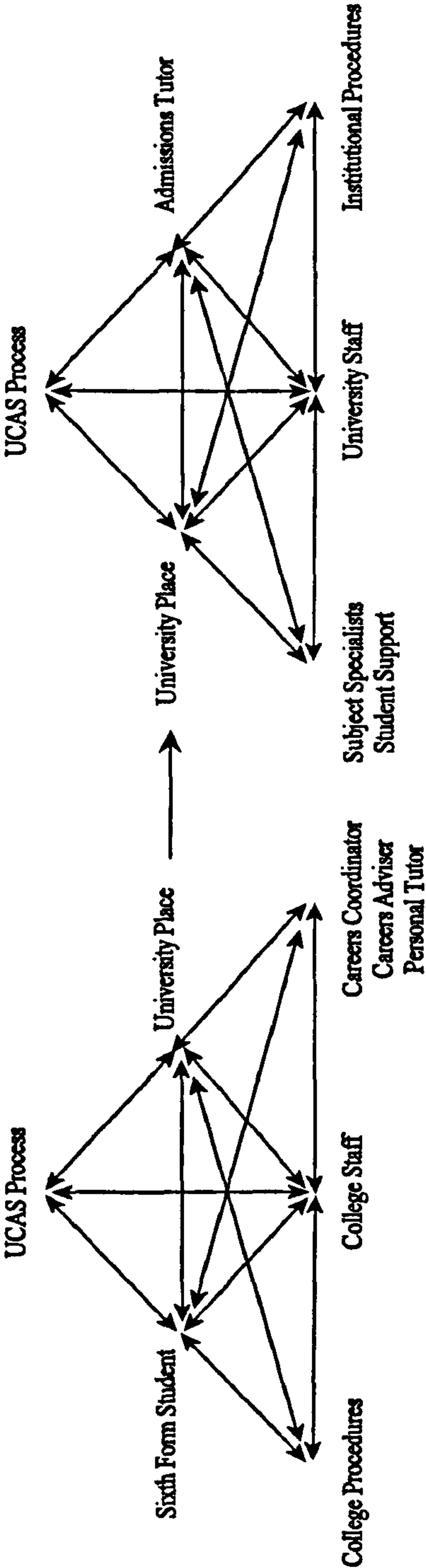


Figure 2.3 The activity systems of the Sixth Form College and HE

and friends who have studied successfully at university. This may mean that current university support systems become inadequate and need to be changed in order to cope with larger numbers of students asking for study support. Hence the activity system of the university changes in response to demands put upon it from outside.

Engeström (2001) also points to the possibility of expansive transformation in activity systems. Taking the above example further, some of the students will enter university, and begin to question the traditional ways in which things are done in the system and over time this can bring about change from within. As more students from WPPs enter university they, as collectives, will present the system with more challenges regarding its practices and procedures, and more change will occur. Engeström argues that an “expansive transformation is accomplished when the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualized to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of activity. A full cycle of expansive transformation may be understood as a collective journey through the *zone of proximal development* of the activity” (p.137). In relation to HE choice and widening participation a full cycle of expansive transformation is difficult to envisage, and I am left wondering what this might mean. A radically wider horizon of possibilities for students sounds attractive in relation to my own values and commitments, but how could this come about? In relation to my study, a full cycle of expansive transformation may involve students from a whole variety of backgrounds gaining places at the full range of universities, but is this simply some kind of naïve ideal, especially when taking into account the impact of society on HE and career choice as discussed earlier? Engeström is very clear that such transformations do not happen overnight, and when examining how change comes about, it is important to remember the role of individual agency (research question 1). In the example of WPP students above, unless and until these students actually enter the activity system of HE and begin to change it from within, the status quo will remain. Here there could be a role for career guidance in encouraging



individual agency. However, this does not mean that transforming activity systems is all down to individuals. Individuals that together form collectives will often have a much greater change impact on the system than individuals alone.

But this poses a question as to whether there is also a role for activity systems in both prompting and supporting change? Here I will use an example from my own professional experience in order to illustrate the ways in which individuals within an activity system that is open to change can bring about change. During the year following my appointment to a post as a Careers Adviser in inner London, job sharing was introduced. This came about following a request to share a job by two women in the service. The two women were colleagues and had been working together as full-time Careers Advisers in a further education college. They became pregnant at the same time, and neither wanted to stop working altogether or to continue working full-time. As a result they decided to ask if they could share a job between them. Initially the request was denied, but following appeals and support from the trade union, a trial period was agreed. At that time, the majority of Careers Advisers were women, and managers wondered whether job sharing could be one way of retaining highly skilled and qualified female staff, following pregnancy and childbirth. The initial job share partnership was successful and, as a result job sharing was introduced into the service, and over a period of time more and more women returned after maternity leave under the job-sharing scheme. Indeed the level and scope of change was such that expectations changed and women who chose to stay at home and not return to the service became the exception rather than the rule.

So how and why was the introduction of job sharing so successful? The first step to its success seems to be two women, two individuals, who were willing through their own agency to make the suggestion and to persevere, even when rejected. They did not succeed alone, but as part of a collective (e.g. with the

trade union, their managers who did not want to lose them and other women who felt they might want to do this in the future.) But it also needs to be noted that the activity system itself was also open to change. The personnel department was sufficiently open to allow them to trial the arrangement for a year before making a final decision. Three important characteristics of transformatory change can therefore be seen through the example given; the first is the agency (and determination) of the women, the second is the support and empowerment of the collective and the third is the openness of the activity system to change. All three working together bring about change, as contradictions are worked through in order to reach solutions.

So what light (if any) can this example shed onto issues of HE choice and the ways in which changes in activity systems can be brought about? Like the women above, there are many individual agents in the sixth form college whose desire is to gain a place at university, and who demonstrate high levels of agency towards achieving their goals (research question 1). There is some evidence from a range of policy initiatives that the HE system is becoming more open to a range of potential students (e.g. the introduction of foundation degrees, level zero courses). However, the UCAS process only handles applications from individuals, not collectives, so students have to wait until they are accepted into HE before they can join collectives and change the system from within.

It is also worth considering at this point some of the contradictions within the activity system of guidance, particularly in relation to HE choice. In seeking to promote equal opportunities and widen participation in HE, guidance practitioners need to be able to encourage individuals to consider a range of possible options. These may include applying to universities they may not have considered before or even applying for HE when they have not considered it at all. However, there is a potential clash here with one of the cornerstones of ethical guidance practice, that of client-centredness (Rogers,



1965) and unless the ideas and wishes are those of the student, they may not come to fruition through lack of ownership; as perhaps happened to one of the students at Stokingham College called Charlotte (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). Such contradictions lie at the heart of “the conflictual nature of social practice” as described by Lave and Wenger, 1991 (p.49).

Other contradictions are created by potentially conflicting government agendas for HE, for example the desire to widen participation as against the introduction of top up fees, as discussed on page 56. Although the government is always quick to point out that students from economically poorer backgrounds will continue to receive financial help, time will tell how far top up fees will actually restrict HE choice, particularly if in the future universities are allowed to charge what they consider to be market rates. Segregation amongst HE students could then become even more marked, as prestigious universities would be likely to charge more than others. Engeström seems to predict that such contradictions will bring about change, but will this change simply be a return to the status quo, where those who can afford to go to elite universities, and overall the HE system remains, or even becomes more segregated, thereby strengthening the double bind? Such universities may argue that they are already oversubscribed, so why would they need to widen participation? One should then ask, in this particular respect, who holds the power to make such decisions? Albeit the government can offer financial incentives, and even impose penalties, at present it is the universities themselves through their governing bodies that ultimately decide.

Bloomer (2001) states that “the aim of activity theory is ... to deepen understanding of the dialectical relations binding the individual and social, cultural and historical (Bannon & Bødker, 1991)” (p.431) and as such, argues that it warrants closer attention in relation to career. When considered alongside Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work on participation in communities of practice, and the potential they both have in relation to understandings of



transformatory change, they both become central to this study and its overall aim of bringing self and society together in relation to career and HE choice.

Jimmy's story is now concluded and today he is still a professional snooker player. Sadly he has not yet won the world championship, but has been runner up no less than six times. So how did the unlikely young man from Tooting achieve his ultimate goal? There appear to have been a number of factors at work simultaneously. Firstly, his own agency, commitment and determination to succeed were key factors, but alone these were probably not enough. In addition Jimmy had the opportunity to participate actively in the community of practice of snooker through spending a lot of time in his local snooker hall. The community welcomed Jimmy, and did not tell him to go back to school, which might have finished his snooker career before it had even begun. At that time the activity system of professional snooker was also becoming more open, and young talented players were welcomed and encouraged, as they were seen to breathe new life into the game. Jimmy White was one of many young players to emerge, and in the modern game many more young players are in evidence.

In relation to HE choice Jimmy's story seems to show that in order to succeed students need agency, commitment and determination, but on their own, these may well not be enough. The activity system of HE needs to be open and encouraging to sixth form students and others who want the opportunity to participate. Through such participation students become different people, people who could succeed in HE when they thought perhaps they could not. Once inside the system they can effect change from within and over time perceptions of HE may change, as more people from a range of backgrounds enter and succeed. Ultimately this is the kind of expansive learning described by Engeström (2001). With many sixth form students with high levels of agency and a strong desire to enter HE in evidence, perhaps the single most

important factor is that the activity system of HE needs to be open to participation by a range of people, and to change.

This chapter has sought to critically consider the work of Vygotsky and in particular those who follow after him and interpret the ZPD from a collectivist viewpoint; also to evaluate what this work might have to offer in relation to issues of realism, career and HE choice. Edwards (2002) argues that educational research has a role in challenging the cultures and practices of activity systems, and this research with its emphasis on activity theory should be no exception. “If we see schools, universities, civil service departments as places which allow particular ways of thinking and recognise possibilities for action and not others, it follows that research needs to be played into these sites as activity systems with histories and goals” (p.163). Such research can serve to bring contradictions to the fore, in the desire for change and transformation. Having reviewed a range of relevant literature it is now time to move on to consider the methodology that underpinned the study, and to provide a detailed description of the research process.

### **Chapter 3 Methodology and method**

In Chapter 1 the research questions under consideration were discussed, which included a brief examination of their origins. The research questions seek to explore the possible application of a collectivist interpretation of Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD in a career guidance context, and focus on the individual as agent, the influences of society, and ways in which the two can be brought together. It is now important to be clear about both how these questions were investigated and why they were investigated in this way, whilst giving a rationale for the choices made. The chapter begins with a description of some key aspects of my own biography and a consideration of the issues this raises, particularly in relation to the perspectives I bring to the choice of methodology, method and techniques and to the process of analysis and interpretation. This is followed by an exploration of a range of methodological issues in relation to the study. Choices of method and research techniques are then discussed, followed by a description of the research setting and the fieldwork carried out. The chapter continues with a description of the data analysis process and concludes with some reflections on my research as an activity system.

#### **Biographical details**

I have chosen to begin this chapter with a consideration of my biography, in order to try to be as clear as possible about the ways in which my own attitudes, beliefs and values have influenced a whole range of choices that I had to make in relation to carrying out the study. Embarking on any kind of research project means that a researcher is faced with a whole range of choices, including what to research and how. These have to be carefully thought through, rational decisions made, and justifications given, in order to be clear about what was investigated and why. This was certainly true of my own experience of the research process.



However, having read the work of Sparkes (1992), it became clear to me that the rational choices I had made were deeply rooted in my own attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences. Sparkes states that “in terms of the meanings attached to any method and the interpretation of the data produced by them, it is not the problem that determines the method but rather a prior intellectual, emotional and political commitment to a given philosophical position that orients the researcher to conceive of, and formulate, the problem within the context of those commitments.” (p.16). Over time it became clear that the focus of my research, and the ways in which I had chosen to undertake it, had indeed been guided subconsciously by my values. I now wish to make these clear as far as I can, in order show my own position in relation to the study.

In order to ensure that issues of values are openly discussed and acknowledged on the part of the researcher, and in order to provide the reader with insights into the impact of my persona and values in the research process, I will devote some space here to a discussion of some of the major influences on my thinking, particularly in relation to career guidance practice and the issue of university choice. Such influences have had an important effect on the whole of the research process, including its focus, the choice of setting and interpretation and evaluation of the data, and throughout this chapter I will make these influences clear. This is Layder’s (1993) Self in his research map, which draws attention to the attitudes and values I bring into the research process. These biographical details are offered as a means of giving readers insights into my background, in order to enable them to make an evaluation of the sources of bias in the study; and they echo the thoughts of Collin and Young (1992) that “the researcher’s own understanding ... derives from a particular standpoint, and can, therefore, be only partial.” (p.2).

I became a Careers Adviser at an early point in my working life, having undertaken a one-year course of training straight after graduating from university in 1977. Prior to this, I attended a mixed grammar school, and was

the first person in my family to study at university, in a city that struggles to encourage its young people into higher education, and is still described today as having a “poor record of sending youngsters to university” (Smithers, 2003, p.3).

My first impressions of career guidance date back to my career guidance interview when I was 16. During the interview I was asked what I hoped to do after taking my exams, in response to which I expressed a wish to stay on at school, take A’ Levels and progress to university. At this point the Careers Officer laughed at my goals, and commented on the doubt he had that they would ever be fulfilled. I was rather stunned, as I had not experienced such negative feedback before in relation to this. The interview progressed into a discussion of what I considered to be personal and irrelevant details of my background, and the interview culminated in a discussion of opportunities in Boots (still one of Nottingham’s biggest employers) and banking, neither of which I had expressed any interest in whatsoever. I left feeling somewhat jaded.

Thanks to much positive encouragement from school and home I did progress to university and very much enjoyed university life. But study there was a disappointment to me as, following the well-meaning advice of teachers at school, I found myself on a course I did not enjoy. From this, I was later to discover the importance of impartial guidance around university course choice. I got to know a Careers Adviser at university and during the latter part of my course I spent some time shadowing her in her work and subsequently decided to apply for Careers Adviser training.

Having reflected on many of my experiences in the profession, the early ones are amongst the most significant in shaping my perceptions of the work of Careers Advisers. Having learned at college that everyone is an individual and all individuals have choice, (the dominant theories at that time were from a



psychological perspective), I then began my working life in the north of Kent in a time of economic recession. When I started work at the Careers Office there were 750 young people registered as unemployed, and only one local job vacancy (an example I still give to students in training). Young people in the area were trying to make choices within the very severe restrictions that society and their local geographical area imposed upon them. In addition a significant number of the young people were from the Sikh community, which seemed to impose another set of cultural restrictions, particularly on young women. I quickly began to see that individual choice was only part of the equation and the role and impact of society and culture could not be ignored.

In 1980 I moved to work in Brixton in inner London and found myself faced with another set of challenges. Here work was more available, although the recession was still ongoing, but young people faced barriers in the form of discrimination, particularly on the grounds of race and gender. I noticed that staff trying to place young people into work did not mention the exact location of the Careers Centre unless forced, as most staff felt that employers were often then prompted to say that vacancies were filled.

In particular two contrasting examples from my experience stand out in my memory. The first occurred whilst working in a girls' school where 98% of the girls were from ethnic minorities, where I met Sonia, an able young black woman who was interested in a career in Law. On exploring this idea further, she became adamant that she would not be able to do this and when asked why, she said, "Because black people, especially girls, don't become lawyers". She was not prepared to consider the possibility of trying to overcome the barriers with support from me.

The second example is of Tracy, a young woman who was interested in practical work and who expressed a half-hearted interest in hairdressing. On exploring this further she said that her real interest was in painting and



decorating, but "girls don't do that sort of work". We discussed what was involved in the work and her experience of doing a whole range of decorating at home and she decided to apply for jobs with my help. A few months later she got a job as an apprentice painter and decorator with a local council.

These early experiences made lasting impressions on me of the work of Careers Advisers, and served to form some of the values and beliefs that I bring to the education and training of Careers Advisers today. At the heart of these is my belief that in a democratic society each individual has choice and has the potential for growth and development (their ZPD). Society will impose many restrictions on the choices of those individuals and will erect barriers that limit success (e.g. the social variables of race, gender and social class). Individuals also have the right to choose whether or not to try to overcome these barriers, and are often more likely to be successful with the help of someone like a Careers Adviser, who can give independent and impartial guidance and support.

It is also important to discuss briefly my current role, and the ethical dilemmas it brings to the research process. Being an educator and trainer of Careers Advisers involves regular teaching of guidance interview skills and the assessment of students against criteria. This experience proved useful when interviewing students before and after their guidance interviews, and open questions enabled me to gain an understanding of their learning during the guidance process. However, during observations of their interviews with a Careers Adviser I had to remind myself constantly of my role as researcher, remembering to leave behind my role as an assessor of interview skills in the research context. I also felt it necessary to discuss this with the Careers Adviser concerned, so that any unrealistic expectations (e.g. that I would comment on the effectiveness of the interviews) would be averted. This echoes with experiences of Measor and Woods (1991), who as experienced educators and as assessors of teachers, were used to assessing the performance

of student teachers and had to wash their minds clean of this and focus on the research itself.

These are just some of the inherent values and beliefs that I acknowledge and inevitably take into the reflexive research process (Creswell, 2003). For example, the choice of setting for the research came about not only because of personal contacts and practicalities, but also from my deep and enduring interest in the lives of students in inner London, particularly those from ethnic minorities, and those who were about to become the first in their families to go into higher education, as I had been. Equal opportunity issues have continued to be high on my own personal and professional agendas, and research that can point to ways in which individuals can be freed from the stereotypical shackles of society continues to be inherently interesting to me. As in all research, “the personal biography of the gendered researcher, who speaks from a particular class, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspective” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.11) is at work.

Bearing in mind the qualitative nature of the study and in particular the inductive nature of it, I kept a research diary throughout the study, where I could record thoughts, feelings and ideas as the study progressed. This provided an invaluable aid to reflection, and writing in the diary regularly provided a mechanism for engaging in complex reasoning (Creswell, 2003). It also provided an aid to reflexivity, helping me to be sensitive to my own biography and my own part in the process, particularly in relation to the attitudes and values I brought to the study. On a practical level, it also formed a record of the many ways in which the research developed over time, which proved invaluable when it came to the writing up stage.

## **Methodology**

This section explores the theoretical framework of the study, and the position of the study in relation to the theories of knowledge that have informed it.



In the social sciences, scholars continue to debate ontological issues such as whether or not an objective reality exists. Researchers from the positivist paradigm, who support the proposition of the existence of objective reality, focus their work on its discovery (or falsification) via the testing of hypotheses. Reality is considered apprehendable and research is carried out using quantitative method via statistical techniques converted into precise mathematical formulae, or by qualitative scientific experiment, in order to make predictions about a range of phenomena (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). On reflection such methodologies held little appeal to someone like myself, as I still have some aversion to figures, no doubt stemming from my memories of Maths in school. This kind of research is deductive in character, and the role of researchers is to stand outside the situation and investigate it with detachment, as hypotheses are subjected to empirical testing. As a person who is inherently interested in people and the different ways in which they approach situations, again this had little appeal.

Positivist approaches have been criticised on a number of grounds, particularly in the social sciences, where the existence of an objective reality is contested. Here it is argued that human behaviour cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes that people attach to human activity. Such understandings will vary from person to person, so the existence of an objective reality becomes contested as people bring different meanings to bear on phenomena. In opposition to this position of detachment, it can be argued that all researchers, whether they are using quantitative and/or qualitative method, interpret their findings in the light of their beliefs and preconceived ideas. In this sense, "All research is interpretive, guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied." (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.13).



Researchers from the interpretivist paradigm focus on “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.2) via the use of qualitative techniques, which enable them to examine in depth the verbal data of participants. During the whole of my professional life I have spent a great amount of time in interactions with others, both in career guidance and latterly in teaching, and see myself as a ‘people person’. Research that would allow me to engage in interactions with others, in order to find out more about their views and perspectives and seek to analyse and interpret them was therefore very attractive to me. Research in the interpretivist paradigm is inductive in nature and facilitates an examination of the meanings that participants bring to the research process. Qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings, and this gave me the opportunity to spend some time observing practice, again something I enjoyed.

The literature review in Chapter 2 traces the development of the concept of career from positivist notions of a career for life, to constructivist ones of self-management and navigation of a pathway through life. It has already been suggested that the concept of career is inherently abstract, and people can be seen to attach a range of meanings to it. The notion of career has become pluralistic, meaning different things to different people, at different points in their lives, and reflects an ontology of multiple realities. In this changing environment, reality can be seen to be pliable, in the sense that it is stretched and shaped by individuals in response to things that happen in the changing world around them. This study seeks to interpret the meanings that students bring to the process of HE choice, which serves to locate the research within the interpretivist paradigm, where “what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective” (Schwandt, 1994, p.125). In a study reliant upon verbal data from participants and its interpretation by both researcher and readers, it is important to recognise that all participants in the research process will bring their own experiences, attitudes and values to that

process. Cousins (2002) argues that in qualitative research, “meaning is found in the experience of the person observed, but is then re-interpreted through the researcher’s own biases and perceptions” (p.199). She also makes the point that in postmodern times, “all knowledge is partial and is taken from the perspective the researcher holds towards what they are studying” (p.199).

Because of the impact of change, career can be described as a journey through life, during which career is constructed in an ongoing way, as distinct from discovering the objective reality of a career to be pursued for life. Knowledge about career is created as individuals construct new meanings in the light of their experience, and in response to change. From my own experience, thankfully career was not the objective reality of the Careers Officer who interviewed me in school (i.e. Boots or banking) who stood outside my situation, but one that I could construct, and continue to construct throughout my life. Studies of career such as this one are therefore consistent with the research paradigm of constructivism. Here the focus is on individual agency, and the individual accounts of the students, and the factors at work in the HE choice process, which are interpreted, in order to construct new understandings. My own interpretations of these accounts serve to “construct a reading of these meanings” and “to offer the inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies” (Schwandt, 1994, p.118).

Collin and Young (1992) point to the usefulness of interpretivist approaches when studying career. They take a social constructionist viewpoint arguing that people construct career in social contexts, and that “in order to make sense of the events in their world, people have to interpret those events in terms that are meaningful to them” (p.2). These terms are stories and metaphors (like the one that Tommy uses of joining dots discussed in Chapter 4 on pages 108 to 120) that enable people to make sense of their experiences. They argue that interpretive perspectives have become particularly important in postmodern times, when the context of career is changing rapidly, necessitating ongoing



interpretation on the part of the individual. Taking an interpretivist approach allowed me to listen to the perspectives of the students, to hear their stories and metaphors and discover what was meaningful to them.

So far it has been established that this research is firmly rooted in interpretivism and is constructivist in its theoretical orientation. The research is therefore primarily inductive in character, which allows ideas and interpretations to emerge from the data gathered via an examination of the perspectives of the participants and the meanings they bring to the HE choice process. In particular the perspectives of the individual students are central to the study, and the verbal data gathered is examined in depth in order to provide a rich description and analysis of their interpretations of the ways in which they are making their HE choices.

The starting point for this study is its explicit focus on social constructivism, where knowledge is constructed in a cultural context in interactions with others. The literature review places Vygotsky's work within the social constructivist paradigm, with its emphasis on the social construction of meaning via activity and interaction with others. From this perspective, knowledge and truth are not absolute, but are created through the process of interaction with others. This supports a subjectivist epistemology, where researcher and subject create understandings via a process of interaction and interpretation. In this particular study, knowledge about the ways in which the students make their HE choices is constructed by the participants, and I as the researcher and the students together create new understandings, as I seek to interpret the perspectives of the students. Without the perspectives of the students and others involved in the process, such knowledge could not have been constructed.

Social constructivism emphasises that meaning making takes place in the social context of transactions between people. Bloomer (2001) argues that



Vygotsky's work has in part inspired social constructivist thought, but points out that "its emphasis upon the social construction of meaning and personal knowledge in a symbolic world suggest it draws upon the basic organising ideas of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism" (p.431). Symbolic interactionism is a social psychological term that is described by Schwandt (1994) as "interpretive science in search of portraying and understanding the process of meaning making" (p.123). Human beings interact with one another in the search for meaning, and these interactions are termed symbolic because we communicate via language and other symbols. However, Bloomer also points to weaknesses in symbolic interactionism in relation to its limited ability to bring self and society together, and the ways in which it serves in practice to maintain their separation. If we agree with Bloomer, this could point to possible weaknesses and limitations in Vygotsky's work, in relation to its ability to bring self and society together in the context of career guidance. As this aspect is at the very heart of this study, this is particularly worthy of note, and offers a word of caution regarding its possible application. Bloomer also argues that the aim of activity theory is to bring these two dimensions together, and on reflection, this could point to the particular importance of activity theory as a key part of the theoretical framework of this study. This is a further indication of the value in focusing on the collectivist interpretation of the ZPD, as discussed in Chapter 1 on page 13.

### **An emerging qualitative case study method**

Having established that constructivism within the paradigm of interpretivism offers the theory of knowledge that can best facilitate an examination of the research questions posed, it is now important to consider how these questions might be explored. The two following aspects will be considered in this section; firstly the adoption of qualitative method and secondly the features of case study and some of its inherent strengths and weaknesses.

The literature review traces the ways in which some of Vygotsky's ideas have been developed. When writing from a collectivist approach to the ZPD, writers such as Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that knowledge is constructed *by participation* in social settings through interactions with others. In a study such as this, with its focus on formal career guidance, it is then important to select a method that will provide opportunities to observe this participation in the social settings of career guidance. Bearing in mind that my own research is also an activity system (see pages 104 to 105), I needed a method that would allow me to participate as well, and construct knowledge in interactions with others. To observe only would not have been enough, I also needed to talk to people directly and hear and interpret their perspectives in order to construct my own. This exploration appears to be facilitated best by the use of qualitative method, where verbal data can be interpreted in the light of both literature and the research questions.

In order both to gain access to the observation of such participation and to have the opportunity to participate myself, it was important to select a method that would allow access to observations of career guidance interviews, and to allow me to have discussions with relevant people (e.g. students, Careers Advisers, Careers Co-ordinators). An examination of other relevant areas that facilitate career learning, such as programmes of Careers Education and tutorial support could also prove useful. In such circumstances all researchers face choices regarding method. In this case one option was to try to gain a more general impression by gathering verbal data from a range of sources; for example by carrying out research activities in a number of different settings, with different students, in order to try and put together a more general picture. The advantages in taking such an approach would be in its breadth and the generalisations that could then be made from it (although this is always debatable in any kind of research). The weaknesses would be related to the depth of the examination and whether any analysis would then be too superficial to lead to any specific recommendations for practice.



Research settings, like any other context, differ from one to another, and are subject to a range of different variables. Rather than seeking to gain a general impression by gathering verbal data from a range of sources, where any number of variables could be at work, I chose a case study method, focusing on a number of students in a particular setting, in order to limit the variables at work and to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participation in the activity system of career guidance in the college. In any research situation, many different variables will be at work, including state variables (Hage and Meeker, 1988) such as race and gender. Other process variables will also be at work and, in relation to this particular study, these could include the range and quality of careers education received by the students concerned. For example, students in receipt of a well-developed careers education programme may make their choices differently to those who have had little or no careers education. Another key process variable could be access to materials that facilitate decision-making (e.g. availability of prospectuses, computer facilities and access to the internet). By deciding to undertake the research within a single institution, the effects of such process variables could be minimised. However, this is not meant to imply that these and other state variables will then no longer be at work in the situation concerned and will not have an impact upon it. On the contrary, the impact of variables such as race and gender on career choice is well documented. Examples of this include Leong and Hartung (2000), who call for career guidance to become more sensitive and multicultural in its orientation and for cultural specificity in relation to research about career, and Höpfl and Hornby Atkinson (2000) who point to ongoing inequalities experienced by women in a segregated labour market.

In any research, the method adopted will have inherent strengths and weaknesses, and researchers will need to be mindful of these and choose a method where, for the purposes of their research, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses. I will now move on to an examination of the key features, strengths and weaknesses of case study in relation to my research.



Case study research refers to research that investigates a few cases, and often a single case, in order to obtain a detailed account of particular phenomena in particular situations. This contrasts with social survey, which attempts to paint a broad picture, gathering data from a wide population, in order to make generalisations between cause and effect. One particular strength of a case study approach is its ability to facilitate an in-depth study of phenomena. Another feature of a case study approach is that case study researchers construct cases out of naturally occurring social situations, as distinct from experiments, in which the researcher deliberately creates situations in which phenomena can be observed and tested.

The examination of cases is not unique to research, and many professionals in different contexts examine cases as part of their work, (e.g. doctors, lawyers, and social workers.) Such work engages professionals in the examination of cases that are seen as typical, which might then be generalised to other people in similar situations, and to examine those that are atypical, which might either disconfirm particular phenomena, or add new perspectives to things already known. Gomm et al (2000) assert that “it is likely that case study *research* arose out of, or at least was strongly influenced by, case study approaches in other fields” (p.1), such as medicine, social work, psychology, education and managements studies.

The study of a case or cases in the context of research can be either quantitative or qualitative, or a combination of both. For example, a case study of the academic achievements of students in a particular geographical area might employ a quantitative method, focusing on the examination of test and public examination results to show statistical trends over a period of time. A case study of the academic achievements of a particular child might employ a qualitative method, where the child and other influential adults (parents and guardians, teachers, etc.) are interviewed, in order to gather verbal data, which can then be interpreted. A case study of the academic achievements of

students in a particular school might employ a mixed quantitative and qualitative method, with both statistical and verbal data informing the study. This particular case study is qualitative, and, as Stake (2000b) argues, “Case studies have become one of the most common ways to do qualitative inquiry”, and “is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used.” (p.435). As a method, case studies serve as a means of gaining more knowledge of the world and in this particular case, the world of the students and their HE choices.

Stake also argues that “Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake, 2000a, p.435), and once I had adopted a case study approach, I spent much time trying to decide what the case was that I was studying. On the surface this seems a straightforward enough question, and as someone undertaking a case study, I felt I needed to be clear about the case in question. However, this was not as straightforward as it might appear. All researchers analyse units or sets of units, and gather data in relation to these that can be interpreted in order to generate understanding (Gomm et al, 2000). In this sense, all research is case study research. But in this study, what is the case in question? Several possibilities came to mind, including the following: the college (this seemed too broad and general), the careers department, the Careers Adviser (this was more focused, but was it the right one for this particular study?), and so on. After much deliberation, I reached the conclusion that the case, or rather cases, were the individual students who participated in the study. They all brought different perspectives and understandings to the process, and should be regarded as individual cases in their own right, that could then be interpreted in the light of the literature, research questions and data.

Case studies have been used extensively by researchers in many fields, including anthropology, psychology, sociology and education, and one of their key strengths is their ability to present studies of experiences of people in real



life situations. Their epistemological advantage is in their ability to reflect the experiences of people, which can give important insights into the different ways in which things are viewed. Case studies can be used as “a method of exploration preliminary to theory development” (Stake, 2000a, p.24) and can provide “documentation of some particular phenomenon or set of events which has been assembled with the specific end in view of drawing theoretical conclusions from it” (Mitchell, 2000, p.169). Although theory development is too large for the scope of this study, the new perspectives and interpretations constructed can be used in order to put forward implications for practice.

Case study also has links with symbolic interactionism, as it provides a method that allows knowledge to be constructed via techniques designed to enable interactions between participants, which can then be analysed and interpreted. Symbolic interactionism demands that researchers actively enter the world of those being studied in order to see situations as they perceive them, and to provide a rich description of them, which can then be interpreted (Schwandt, 1994). This points to another advantage in case study research, in that it allows the reader to go to places where most would not have the opportunity to go, and gain fresh understandings via vicarious experience. Such experience is likely to be less threatening and could encourage a lesser degree of defensiveness and resistance on the part of the reader than real life experience. Case study also allows us to examine things through the eyes of a researcher, and thereby, to see things we may not have seen otherwise (Donmoyer, 2000).

Another strength of case study method is its ability to enable a researcher to “probe deeply and analyse intensively” (Cohen and Manion, 1989, p.124). It was expected that this case study would reveal insights into how the particular students at the sixth form college were making their HE choices, which could lead to some implications for practice. It was, therefore, a particular study of a more general issue; how these students made their choices could go some way towards explaining how others in the future might approach this too.



In Bassey's terms this study is a theory-testing case study, as it seeks to apply the collectivist interpretation of Vygotsky's ZPD to career guidance, and can be described as exploratory (Yin, 1994), which emphasises its inductive nature. Bassey (1999) describes such case studies as "particular studies of general issues" where "the singularity is chosen because it is expected in some way to be typical of something more general" (p.62). The career guidance activities undertaken and observed in the sixth form college studied, can be seen to be typical of the kinds of activities that would be taking place in sixth forms at that time in many parts of the UK. As Gomm et al (2000) assert, case study can "deal with the case as an instance of a type, describing it in terms of a particular theoretical framework (implicit or explicit)" (p.4).

Case study method has been criticised on many fronts. In particular one of the criticisms levelled at it relates to issues of generalisability and the dangers of assuming that something is generally the case on the basis of a small scale, localised study. Hargreaves (1996) accuses case studies of being too small in scale to produce findings that are of relevance to a wider audience, and that often they lack follow up. Is it fair to assume that the ways in which a small number of students in one sixth form college make their HE choices could tell us something about how other students in similar circumstances do this? Although hard and fast claims to knowledge could not be made on the basis of such a small sample of work, it is hoped that some "fuzzy generalizations" (Bassey, 1999, p.12) could be made. Such fuzzy generalizations arise "from studies of singularities" and typically claim "that *it is possible, or likely, or unlikely that* what was found in the singularity will be found in similar situations elsewhere" (ibid).

In response to criticisms leveled at case study regarding generalisability, Yin (1994) also argues that "case studies are ... generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p.10). The cases in question are the students, and in carrying out the study, the intention is not to seek the

kind of generalisations that suggest that because these students make their HE choices in particular ways, that all other sixth form students will do the same; but rather that, as a result of carrying out the case study, insights can be gained. These insights can then be used in making recommendations for practice, which can then be reviewed and evaluated in the light of further experience. The purpose of the study then is “not to represent the world, but to represent the case” (Stake, 2000b, p.347), which will inform practice.

Stenhouse (1979) argues that “the fundamental data source for comparative education must be description”(p.6), often provided by case studies, which can provide “a basis for generalization and hence cumulation of data embedded in time” (Stenhouse, 1978, p.21). In this case study, such description can lead to implications for practice, which may lead in the future to further studies. Following such studies, retrospective generalisations might be made as case histories are developed, and studies of these samples could then lead to further predictive generalisations (Stenhouse, 1980). This study can be described as an “instrumental case study” where “a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue” (p.347). Understandings regarding how the students are making their HE choices and the dynamics between self and society are the prime interest, and a case study approach provides a role in facilitating an exploration of this.

In any research it is important to consider issues of validity and reliability, and in qualitative case study research both concepts are problematic. In quantitative research validity can be defined by asking “whether or not one is measuring whatever it is that is supposed to be measured” (Wolcott, 1994, p.343). However in qualitative research such as this study, where research is interpretive, inductive and exploratory in nature, it is not a matter of deciding first what you would like to find out, and then going out to find it. In fact, it would clearly be a mistake to do so, as such research would face much criticism on the grounds of bias. In this study, I set out to explore the possible



application of Vygotsky's ZPD in a career guidance context, collected data, and then analysed it and interpreted it in the light of literature. From this process the research questions emerged, and indeed changed significantly through the study, gaining a sharper focus on the collectivist interpretation of the ZPD as time went on. The interpretations that ensued were not ones that I could have predicted at the beginning of the study.

As an alternative to validity, writers (Creswell, 2003; Wolcott, 1994) have detailed steps that researchers can take in order to ensure that data description, analysis and interpretation are trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, in Bassey, 1999), in order to validate the accuracy of findings. In this particular study, I was able to follow some of these steps, such as accurate data recording, working with critical friends, sharing my findings with colleagues and students, all of which served both to validate the research and to sharpen my critical thinking and subsequent interpretations. However, it was not possible to spend prolonged time with the participants, particularly the students in the study. They were all using free periods to have their career guidance interviews, and spending more time in addition to this in talking with me. In a crowded timetable it was difficult to find time for this, and asking for more time would have met with some opposition.

The concept of reliability in research of this kind is also problematic, and can be defined as "the extent to which a research fact or finding can be repeated given the same circumstances" (Bassey, 1999, p.75). In qualitative case study research such as this, with its emphasis on multiple realities and different interpretations, it is clear that it would not necessarily be possible for another researcher to study the case and draw the same conclusions. Indeed the interpretations made are my own, from my perspective and my worldview, so it would be wrong to assume that these would be the same as someone else's. Throughout I have sought to make my values clear, so that readers can see my position and evaluate any sources of bias.



A case study such as this can be described as “close-to-the field research” (Edwards, 2002, p.157), and brings me as a researcher into direct contact with students and career guidance professionals, with the aim of seeking new meanings and interpretations in relation to how the students make their HE choices. In her article Edwards points to what she believes to be a fundamental role for educational research in seeking to challenge activity systems and their cultures and processes, highlighting Engeström’s (1995) work on expansive transformation. This is particularly worthy of note for this study with its explicit focus on activity theory and situated approaches to learning. At the time of the research the students were part of the activity system of the sixth form college, with its culture, practices and ways of thinking. All the students in the study hoped to gain entry to the activity system of HE, and this study can shed some light onto the many complexities involved in enabling the students to progress from the sixth form college into universities of their choice (or otherwise). However, it would be easy to sit back and report on the successes, the difficulties and the barriers that the students experienced, and leave it there. The real challenge comes in thinking through the ways in which the students can be brought into closer proximity with universities, and the ways in which universities can become open to transformatory change through participation, and the role that formal guidance can play in this process. This point is developed further in the final chapter.

In their chapter on the future of careers guidance, Gothard et al (2001) note the “need for career researchers and theorists to make their work more relevant and accessible to practitioners” and point to the usefulness of work “using case studies as a means of relating theory to practice” (p.137). For a student such as myself undertaking a professional doctorate, this is particularly worthy of note, and it is hoped that the case study method chosen will both evaluate theory and facilitate its application to practice as suggested. Hopefully such research will be of interest to, and communicate easily with, practitioners in the field, as it

speaks clearly of empirical work with actual young people making real life choices, thereby resonating with the everyday experiences of Careers Advisers. An example of case study research from the field of career development and guidance is the work of Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000) and their study of Stokingham College, as discussed on page 48.

### **Research techniques**

Having decided that a qualitative case study method would best facilitate the exploration of the research questions, in this section I will describe and justify the research techniques employed.

Firstly I considered which people would offer some key perspectives on the research questions and, as I had reached the conclusion that the students were the cases I was studying, it seemed important to place their perspectives in a central position. I hoped that this would give the students a voice in the study, and that my role as researcher would be both to analyse and interpret what they were saying in the light of literature and my research questions. One of the cornerstones of the career guidance profession is the concept of client-centredness (Rogers, 1965), where the needs wishes and aspirations of the client are central to the process. Within this approach much emphasis is placed on allowing clients to express their views and discuss issues that are important to them. At the same time the onus is on the helper to listen to their clients and check that they have understood what the client has said. Bearing this in mind the students who participated in the study were encouraged to offer their insights into how they made their choices and what was important to them. I listened to what they had to say with interest, and checked regularly to try and be sure that I had understood what they were saying. Placing the voices of the students in a central position in the study seemed fitting for a study in the field of career guidance.



Secondly, the perspectives of the Careers Adviser carrying out the guidance interviews, and how he perceived the choices of the students concerned, could offer other insights. Thirdly, the perspectives of the Careers Co-ordinator and an examination of the structure and content of the college's careers education programme for students could also be useful. By hearing and examining all of the above perspectives, the research questions would be subject to a process of triangulation, which decreases the possibility of a narrow approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation. As Banister et al (1994) point out, "Insights that rely on only one source of data are clearly limited" (p.146), and such data triangulation "allows illumination from multiple standpoints, reflecting a commitment to thoroughness, flexibility and differences of experience" (p.145). In addition, the students' interviews with the Careers Adviser were observed in order to achieve method triangulation.

In order to undertake an in-depth exploration of HE choice I decided that the study would focus on detailed data gathered from six students. This was a deliberate strategy to enable a detailed examination and evaluation of the data in the expectation that some key themes would emerge. It was felt that a focus on six students would produce a manageable amount of data for subsequent interpretation, mitigating against being swamped by large amounts, but giving enough to enable some comparisons to be made. The students concerned were studying for A2s or the equivalent, and in the process of making their university choices, which is one of my own particular ongoing professional interests. It should be emphasised that the participating students were not considered to be typical in any way, but it was expected that focusing on students who were at a similar stage to one another in their career thinking, would facilitate the making of some reasonable comparisons.

The techniques used were as follows.



- An interview with each student before his or her careers interview, in order to try to determine their current position in relation to his or her HE choices. (Twenty minutes and hereafter termed the pre-interview)
- Observation of their interview with the College's Careers Adviser, making notes against an observation schedule. (Forty five minutes and hereafter termed the interview)
- An interview with each student following his or her careers interview to discuss what they now felt regarding their choices and how their perspectives might have changed. (Twenty minutes and hereafter termed the post-interview)

The research interviews were timed in this way for the following reasons. The pre-interview was carried out immediately before the interview, in order to try and ascertain the students' position at that particular point in time in relation to their HE choice. The interview then followed, and was observed. The post-interview was carried out immediately after the interview, in order to try to maintain the focus of the study on what I would describe as formal guidance (see Chapter 1 on page 6). A copy of the interview and observation schedules is attached at Appendix 1.

However, there are some clear limitations in adopting this approach. For example, in undertaking the post-interviews immediately after the interviews it was very likely that the students concerned were still processing much of the discussion that took place, and interviewing them at some later point would have meant that this processing would then have been undertaken to an extent and their ideas further developed. The post-interviews could have been carried out when they had completed their UCAS forms or after receiving offers, but by then many factors outside the scope of formal guidance could have been at work, and the focus of the study would have needed to change.

Undertaking the research in this way could also have led to a significant researcher effect, in that the pre-interviews might have altered the way in

which the students then approached their interviews. Having the opportunity beforehand to reflect on such things as their choices, the research they had been able to do so far and what they felt was important to them, could have had an effect on how they approached their interviews compared to how they would have approached them without this opportunity.

All the interviews that I carried out were semi-structured in nature. Such interviews maintain a clear focus on the issues, but also allow flexibility and allow the interviewee to speak more widely on issues that they feel are important and relate to them. This technique enabled me to approach the interviews with a clear focus on the issues of HE choice, whilst remaining sufficiently open to allow the voices of the people concerned to be heard (Denscombe, 1998). Adopting this approach also meant that I could be flexible, and allow the participants to speak freely on issues that were important to them. The questions posed were very open in nature, but with a clear focus on the issues around HE choice, which meant that the data gathered was both relevant to the study and to the participants. Whilst interviewing I completed a schedule (see Appendix 1) with open questions around HE choice as prompts, and spaces to write notes on issues that were important to the students.

As described in Chapter 1, the research questions themselves were not static, and evolved over a period of time, particularly during the period of data analysis and beyond. The technique of semi-structured interviewing enabled me to collect data where the views of the participants were central, which I could then interpret in the light of the research questions and literature. This facilitated the inductive nature of the whole process, where the data was interpreted in order to generate interpretations and new understandings.

Whilst observing the interviews I completed an observation schedule, which had pre-identified categories (see Appendix 1) stemming from the literature



review (Denscombe, 1998). However, having transcribed all the interviews, these then became redundant, but they would have been very useful if anything had gone wrong with the technicalities of recording.

### **The research setting**

The setting for the research was also important to consider, for a number of reasons. In order to carry out the research I needed to have easy access to students and the opportunity to interview them and find out their perspectives. But it was also important to consider which students I wanted to interview. My interest in university choice, and my belief in the importance of impartial guidance in the choice process are detailed in the biography section of this chapter on pages 74 to 79. Whilst working as a Careers Adviser, the work I always enjoyed most was with students who were making their HE choices, and in particular those students who ordinarily would not have been expected to go to university. I found working in two Further Education Colleges that had a commitment to giving students a second chance in education, particularly fulfilling. Many of the students (of whom many were from ethnic minorities) had attended comprehensive schools in inner London, and were deemed to have failed in the system (for some it may be fairer to say that the system had failed them). On reflection I chose a research setting where I would have the opportunity to explore further the issue of university choice with students in inner London.

Another consideration in the choice of research setting was pragmatic, that is needing a setting that would facilitate data gathering. The particular college was chosen because of links I had with personnel there, and the importance the college attached to issues of HE choice. In addition they had a well developed programme of careers education and good facilities, for example a separate room where I could carry out the pre and post-interviews. The college's ethnic mix with 80% of students from minority groups, meant that I could



pursue my interest in working with black students, which in turn resonated with my commitment to issues of equal opportunities and social justice.

The institution chosen is mixed (male and female), with a large student population (over 1000 students) from a range of ethnic backgrounds, with many living in what are termed WPP areas (Widening Participation Postcodes). Many students are the first in their families to go on to higher education and the college's culture is one of intensive support, as reported by the college's Careers Coordinator. Each student in the college has a personal tutor, who is available for individual support. In addition there are weekly tutor group meetings, where students meet with their personal tutor in a group to work on aspects of core curriculum.

Students are supported in a variety of ways through the UCAS process. On a group level, sessions on aspects of the process are held in tutor groups with personal tutors. All tutors use a programme of study designed by the Careers Co-ordinator, which takes students through the UCAS process step by step; from making initial choices and finding out information from an HE fair, to selecting courses and institutions, preparing a personal statement and what to do if you are unsuccessful in getting the grades needed and the clearing system. In addition to these sessions, students are given a comprehensive booklet written by the careers department confirming each step.

On an individual level, the Careers Adviser interviews all students to discuss their HE choice when they request one. The group sessions often prompt students to take advantage of the individual interviews, and tutors also actively encourage those who for some reason may be more reluctant to attend. In addition, drop-in sessions are held for one hour each morning during periods 1 and 2, when students can bring their UCAS forms along for individual checking, and some coaching is offered for those who are finding writing their

personal statements difficult. Some students attend several drop-in sessions before their UCAS form is complete.

### **The fieldwork**

During the summer of 2001, the fieldwork was planned and three days in November 2001 were agreed when the research would take place, with the aim of undertaking interviews with two students per day. The work was timed to coincide with the students' need to make crucial decisions regarding higher education. The Careers Adviser concerned operates a system of self-referral whereby individual students sign up for an interview as and when they feel they need one, or are prompted to ask for one following a tutor group session. Students who opted for an interview on one of the three days in question were asked if they would be happy to contribute to the research, and I was able to spend time with each one before the interviews, outlining the reasons for the research, including what was involved, issues of confidentiality and recording, and securing their agreement.

The students in the study were self-selecting and comprised three males and three females, all but one were from ethnic minorities. Of the three males, one was white British, one was black African and the third black Caribbean. Of the three females, one was black African and the other two were black Caribbean. More detail on each individual student is given in Chapter 4 where his or her story is told. The self-selection of students was a deliberate strategy, in order to eliminate possible criticisms of selecting students who may have been chosen for particular reasons.

The interviews were timed to take place one in the morning after break, and one straight after lunch. This gave the necessary preparation time outside of lesson times, to ensure that the students felt comfortable with the process, with the hope of enabling them to speak more freely. The timings also allowed for some non-attendance, in that, if the person scheduled to attend after break was



absent, the next person being interviewed before lunch could then be asked to participate. Similarly, there was time to interview another student, if the one after lunch was absent.

All the interviews were carried out in the College's careers suite, located adjacent to the Learning Resources Centre. This is the usual location for careers guidance interviews in the College, and hence provided a natural setting for the fieldwork. The careers suite consists of a private interviewing room, where the Careers Adviser carried out the guidance interviews, and a separate private interviewing room, where I undertook interviews with the students both before and after their guidance interview. The provision of a private room for interviews before and after the guidance interviews was important in enabling the students to talk freely. The process concerned did not involve an evaluation of the effectiveness of the guidance interview, but in order to discuss how they had learned in the interview, students needed to be able to say, for example, if they had not learned as much as they had hoped. It might have been that their interview had not been as effective for them as they had hoped, perhaps implying some criticism of the Careers Adviser concerned. If they had been asked to discuss such issues with the Careers Adviser present or within earshot, it could have meant that the students could have been tempted to say what they felt they ought to say, rather than speaking honestly. This is not meant to imply that all students were totally honest in the process, as this would be naïve.

All interviews were carried out during the three days identified, and, whenever possible students were interviewed straight after their guidance interview, but due to the constraints of the College's timetable, this was not always possible. In this case, the student was interviewed at the earliest possible opportunity afterwards, in order to preserve consistency in the process and subsequent interpretation of data.



All interviews with students were recorded using a discreet audiotape, and it is impossible to know how much this affected what was said; the so-called "Observer effect" (Denscombe, 1998, p.47). As Tizard and Hughes, (1991) point out, recording can be "cumbersome and intrusive in natural settings" (p.25), and again it is possible that the students concerned might have said more if the interviews had not been recorded, but recording proved to be essential for subsequent data analysis. However, in order to seek to minimise the observer effect, students were shown the tape recorder, and the recording process was explained to them. Beforehand I practised with the equipment, in order to make sure that recordings were made smoothly on the day. Detailed field notes were taken during the interviews with the Careers Adviser and Careers Co-ordinator. These were not taped as the participants felt uncomfortable with this and specifically asked for it not to be done. In retrospect this was a disadvantage and something that in future might be avoided with a more detailed explanation beforehand to participants of both my intentions and the reasons for making this request. However, from an ethical standpoint, it is the right of participants to be able to decide whether to comply with my request or not, and is not something that I as a researcher feel I can insist on, even if it involves a possible compromise regarding the quality of the data gathered. All participants were assured that the data gathered was to be used for research purposes only, and would be subsequently erased and written material anonymised in order to safeguard confidentiality.

During the period following the fieldwork, all interviews were transcribed, in order to maintain proximity with the data and to facilitate subsequent data analysis. In order to identify themes in the data, transcribing the whole of the interview was found to be necessary. The transcripts then provided "some sort of permanent record that allows ready access during analysis" (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1996, p.90).

### **Data analysis**

Having transcribed the interviews, I then began a process of data analysis. Initially I undertook a detailed analysis of the interview data in a step-by-step way, in order to immerse myself with the data and look for themes within it. This process began with reading the transcripts as a whole, attaching topic codes, which were grouped together to form themes, and the data was then coded against the themes. All of this served to fragment the stories of the students, and I realised that I had lost sight of them as whole people. I went back to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and their view of learning as the development of the whole person. This, along with feedback received, prompted me to go back to my data and analyse it in a more holistic way, with a focus on the stories of the students. I re-read all the data, whilst thinking about underlying meanings, and posed questions, such as, what is this about? And, why are the participants acting and responding in this way? Activity theory, and in particular Engeström's (2001) triangles, helped me to go beyond description of what was taking place, into analysis and seeking an understanding of some possible reasons why particular things were happening.

When analysing the stories of the students, and in particular the data from the career guidance interviews, many seemed dominated by certain technical issues of the UCAS process (points and grades tariffs etc.), and again this seemed to take my eyes off the students themselves and what they were hoping to gain from the process. I felt I needed to try and understand why things might be happening in this way, and where the students stood in relation to all the technical detail. Within the data, Tommy's metaphor of joining dots, as discussed on pages 108 to 120, stood out as something that seemed to sum up what he felt about the whole process, and about his development as a whole person, which again echoed with the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). I realised that Tommy's metaphor put him at the centre, and not the UCAS process. Moving from description into analysis, Tommy's story began to take on significance, as it seemed to encapsulate my emerging understandings about



the ZPD in a career guidance context. This ultimately helped me take further steps towards a possible interpretation of Tommy's story (Wolcott, 1994), informed by two other key themes that had emerged from the data and literature, namely individual agency and the culture of the college.

Having described the process of data analysis, I will now finish the chapter with some reflections on my own research as an activity system.

### **My research as an activity system**

In the same way as activity theory helped me to understand some of the possible reasons why participants spoke and behaved in certain ways, it also helped me to understand my own research and its context. To conclude the chapter I would like to explore and consider my research as an activity system (Engeström, 2001), in order to understand more about the different facets of my work and actions, and how they relate to one another. Figure 3.1 overleaf serves to illustrate this. The subject of the activity system, and the point of view adopted for this analysis of my research is myself as a researcher, seeking to learn more about research and achieve the object of greater understanding of the research process, and ultimately an EdD. The instruments, or internal and external mediating influences between subject and the object include the case study itself, including such external factors as the interviews with the students, and the system of progress reports that helps me work towards my goals, along with internal factors such as my own levels of motivation and my own view of



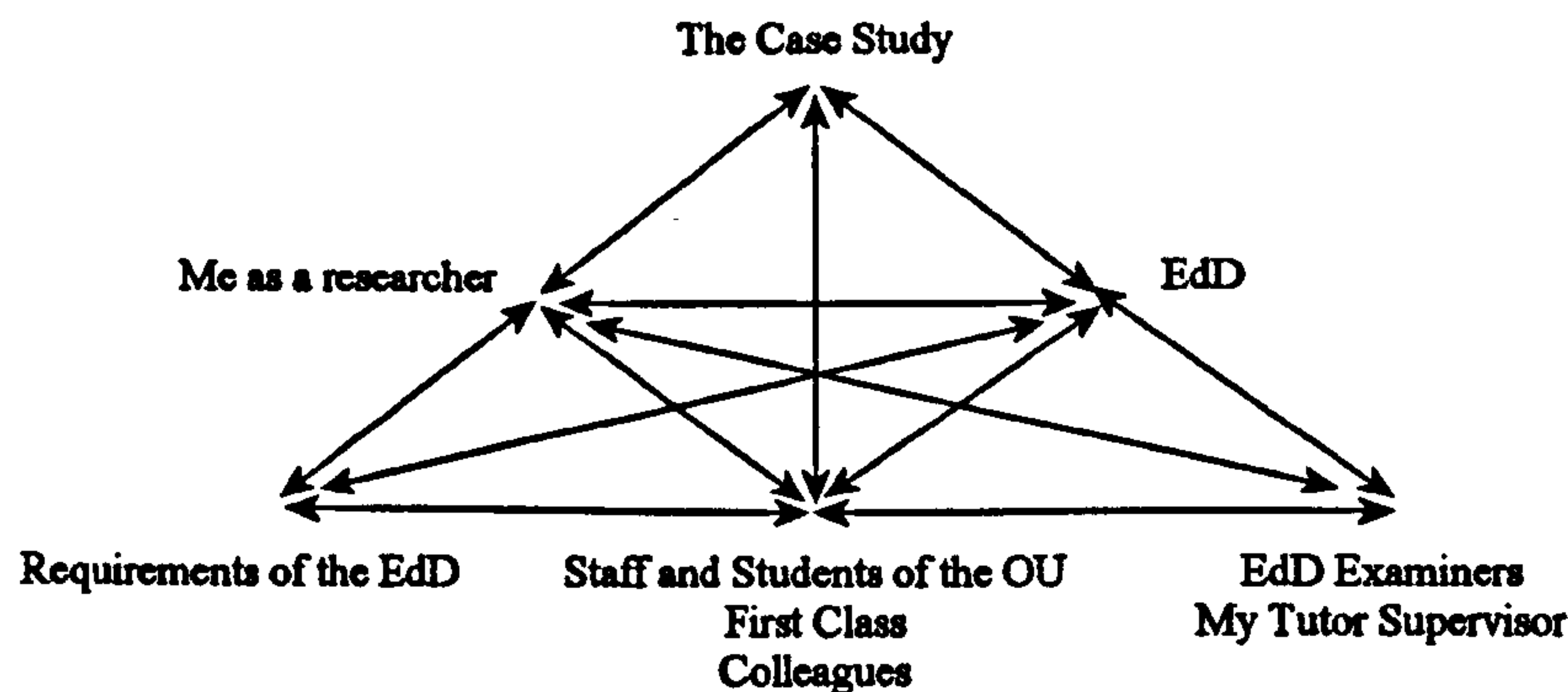


Figure 3.1 The activity system of my research

myself as a researcher. The rules can be seen as the requirements of the EdD, e.g. carrying out a piece of independent research, writing a dissertation of the required length, using the appropriate referencing system, the assessment criteria etc. The community of people who have a shared interest in the object is multi dimensional, and includes staff and students of the Open University, my tutor supervisor and the on line community via First Class. It also includes people in my own institution, such as colleagues in my department, other staff, particularly those who belong to the lifelong learning research group of which I am a member, individuals who have become mentors and critical friends, and students who have heard presentations of my research and posed questions that have challenged my thinking. The division of labour within the activity system of my research includes my tutor supervisor who helps me work towards my goal and uses the rules in order to give me feedback on my work. It also includes the examiners, who ultimately have the power within the activity system to decide the outcome.

This chapter has considered and explored a range of methodological issues related to my research and methodology; method and techniques have also been discussed and evaluated. The impact of my own biography on my research has been explored, and the ways in which my attitudes, values and beliefs have fundamentally affected the research process. A description of the data analysis process has been given, along with some reflections on my

research as an activity system. The focus of the next chapter is data analysis, where the stories of some of the students are used in order to explore some of the key themes within the data.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data analysis**

This chapter focuses on an analysis of the data gathered in the study in relation to the research questions posed in Chapter 1 and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It begins with a brief reminder of the research questions that guided the study and, bearing in mind the interpretation of the ZPD put forward in Chapter 2 as a holistic picture of the development of individuals in their social context, the analysis then focuses on the stories of the individual students, as they make their HE choices. This is in order to give readers a picture of the whole student as revealed by the pre- and post-interviews and the interview with the Careers Adviser. Obviously any such picture is only ever partial, as people choose to disclose aspects of themselves in interviews and not to disclose others. The story of Tommy is told first, highlighting the metaphor he used of joining dots. This is then followed by the stories of Dele and Gloria, which are told in order to illustrate significant themes that emerged from both the data and literature, followed by the stories of Errol, Grace and Sandra for the purposes of comparison. The final parts of the chapter comprise an analysis of the data using literature (namely Engeström's triangles and Lave and Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation) as an analytical framework.

In order not to interrupt the flow of stories of the students, I have chosen to include quotations from them within the text itself, highlighted by the use of inverted commas, followed by a reference to where quotations can be found in the transcripts. These quotations are taken directly from the words spoken by the participants, so that their voices can be heard. At times this means that sentences are fragmented, incomplete and ungrammatical. The students are referred to by pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity.

It is clear that the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 poses some key questions in relation to career guidance practice, and in particular the practice observed



during the research. Throughout the chapter I use Engeström's (2001) activity theory triangles as a framework for analysis, showing the ways in which the two activity systems (those of the sixth form college and universities) interact with each other. Along with this, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation and the ZPD are also used to illuminate the data. The research questions are addressed in an ongoing way through the chapter, as issues with the data are encountered and discussed. This discussion is then continued in the next chapter on evaluation.

### **A brief review of the research questions**

In Chapter 1 the research questions were discussed in relation to the overall aims of the study. The research problem that this study seeks to address is how Careers Advisers might be able to promote equality of opportunity in relation to HE choice and career when society appears to influence people to conform to its expectations. It also seeks to identify any new insights that Vygotsky's ZPD, situated learning and activity theories might reveal in relation to this problem. In order to explore this, the following questions were researched.

1. How do the students demonstrate individual agency in the HE decision-making process?
2. What factors appear to influence their HE choices?
3. What influence can career guidance have on the dynamics between agency and society?
4. How can these new understandings enhance career guidance practice?

These questions are examined within the stories of the individual students, and reference to them is made at regular points, along with references to literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

### **The story of Tommy**

I have chosen to begin with Tommy's story and to give it a central position in my analysis because of a particular metaphor (joining dots) he used during the pre-interview, in order to explain his understanding of the process in which he

was engaging. During data analysis it became clear that this metaphor provided me with a visual representation of what I came to understand as the ZPD in a career guidance context. I describe and interpret this metaphor throughout this chapter and in the conclusions in Chapter 6, in order to give an explanation of my understandings of the ZPD, and the ways in which such understandings can enhance career guidance practice.

### **The pre-interview**

Tommy is white British and, like all but one student (Dele) in the study is 17 years old. Tommy is studying for a BTEC National in Sports Studies and has taken this course because of his love for sport. He has loved sport for as long as he can remember, in particular football. He did very well in GCSE PE, and this prompted him to decide to take his BTEC course. At the start of the pre-interview I asked Tommy what he was hoping to gain from his career guidance interview. He said that he saw it as a chance to talk some things through and used a metaphor “to join the dots” (page 1, line 8) to describe the process in which he felt he was taking part. Here Tommy was describing the kinds of puzzles that children often enjoy completing, where a picture is drawn by joining dots in numerical sequence. Some pictures are straightforward and can be seen in outline before the dots are joined, others are much more complex, and the picture only emerges as the dots are joined. This “join the dots” picture represents Tommy and his future.

Tommy demonstrates a high level of agency (research question 1) in relation to his HE choice, as he clearly describes all the different things he has done in preparation for the task of completing his UCAS form. Along with many other students from the college, Tommy attended an HE fair, where he said he “got loads of prospectuses, went away and looked at them, and then decided I wanted to do Sports Development. After that read things about and phoned up the courses” (p.1, lines 21-24). Tommy clearly articulates the action he has taken by saying “I’ve found all the universities that do Sports Development,



and their entry requirements, and their codes and code names, and I researched them. And my first choice is Liverpool at the moment, John Moores." (p.1 line 14-17).

Various factors seem to be influencing Tommy's HE choice (research question 2). Early on in the pre-interview Tommy raises the issue of wanting to go to a 'good' university, and particularly wants "advice on which are good universities and which are bad" (p.2, line 12) and comments insightfully that "obviously from the prospectuses they are all going to say they're good" (p.2, line 13). Tommy sees things like prospectuses as marketing tools and himself as a possible consumer. His interest in sport and his desire to pursue a career in some aspect of it appear to be strong motivating factors in his choice. Although he went to the HE fair with an open mind, this seemed to be an open mind in relation to sport. "I went to the fair with an open mind, but knew I wanted to work in the sports industry, but not quite sure what" (p.1, line 28-29). As far as sport is concerned, this is something to which he already knows he wants to commit himself. Since attending the fair he has become interested in Sports Development, and now feels that he wants to check out whether or not this kind of course would help him work towards his aim of becoming a personal trainer. Tommy's career interests therefore, seem to be an overriding factor in his HE choice.

It appears that Tommy can see a picture of himself and his future, and he uses the metaphor of joining dots to describe what he sees. The outline of the picture is drawn in dots, showing what he might become in the future, and, as yet, the dots are not joined in any significant way. At this point the dots symbolise various aspects of Tommy's life, e.g. his interest in sport, his love of football, his desire to be a personal trainer, his wish to enter HE on a sports related course etc. However, the picture is incomplete and changing, for two key reasons. First, Tommy is learning about himself and his HE choices, and data from the post-interview reveals some of the ways in which the dots are



emerging and changing. Second it is important to remember that any picture that a participant gives in the research process is partial, and in essence, this picture is both the one that Tommy chose to disclose and my interpretation of it. Tommy's picture is holistic and represents his development towards his future as he learns more about himself. This emerging picture is all about Tommy "becoming a different person" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.53) and his discovery of himself within his social context.

### **The interview**

At the beginning of his interview with the Careers Adviser, Tommy expresses a desire to "get things clear in my head" (p.3, line7) and, bearing in mind his dots metaphor, this could be achieved through joining some dots in order to make his picture clearer. Tommy articulates his desire to become a personal trainer and his need to check that a sports development course will prepare him for this. This is quickly confirmed by the Careers Adviser, at which point Tommy raises another important factor for him, which is his desire to keep his options open. "I done Sports Development because that's wide and covers a big area" (p.4, line 2).

In a discussion about how he has carried out his research, Tommy speaks again of the HE fair and his use of the internet for getting information and prospectuses. He is particularly interested in a course at Liverpool John Moores, along with another at Oxford Brookes. It appears that most of the courses Tommy is interested in are offered in new universities, although he has also been looking for the entry requirements for Bath and Manchester.

Tommy appears unaffected by issues of "localism" (Reay et al, 2001, p.861) as he is keen to move away from home, and seems to be attracted to the idea of living and studying in another city. However, he says that he will consider the University of East London as an option, because the grades being offered are lower, which could give him a good conditional insurance offer.

The course that the interview then takes is interesting, and raises some important issues and questions in relation to both literature and professional career guidance practice more generally. Tommy's interview becomes rather didactic and dominated by discussions of entry requirements for particular courses and institutions. The balance of the dialogue moves away from Tommy and in favour of the Careers Adviser as he seems to feel a need to try and make Tommy aware of such issues as competition for places, the variety of courses on offer, the differences between an HND and a degree and Tommy's overall prospects of success. There is no doubt that the UK HE system is very complex, and there are many aspects that students may need to consider simultaneously. The UCAS process itself is also complex and can be seen as the instrument at the apex of Engeström's triangle, and this mediating artefact communicates messages that you need to be of a high academic standard to understand the system, with its tariffs and procedures. The picture that Tommy is trying to draw with the aid of dots would appear potentially to contain a lot of fine detail, and the interview observed seems to move clearly in the direction of informing Tommy of a range of issues. Two of these aspects (competition for places and HND courses) were particularly prominent in relation to both the time and emphasis given to them in the discussion, and these will now be considered.

Tommy is predicted to get a distinction in his BTEC course, which in theory should open up study possibilities to him, rather than close them down. However, the Careers Adviser mentions this just twice, e.g. "I know you're predicted a distinction ... that's good and that's important" (p.5, line, 15-17) and the focus of the discussion moves to the perceived intense competition for places. The Careers Adviser uses such phrases as "I know that competition for them is very very keen and also that the entry requirements can be very high" (p.5, lines 12-14) and "John Moores get three, maybe higher, people for each place. That's an awful lot of competition" (p.5, line 22-23). However, later on in the interview, after checking out the specific requirements for John Moores



on the UCAS website, he does concede, "that would be a reasonable one to go for given your predictions" (p.7, lines 4-5).

The Careers Adviser raises the possibility of Tommy applying for HND courses as well as degrees in order to give him "a wider choice of insurance" (p.8, lines 10-11). He suggests that "sometimes people who have done a National Diploma feel more comfortable moving onto an HND course" (p.8, lines 15-16). Later on in the interview Tommy states "It's true, I do prefer being judged on course work rather than exams" (p.10, line2) and the Careers Adviser uses this as an opportunity to talk to Tommy about assessment methods on courses, e.g. "Also look at the assessment method on a course. If it's heavily dependent on big exams at the end of the year, that might be something that would ring alarm bells" (p.10, lines, 22-24). In the post-interview Tommy seems to be considering HNDs as a real possibility because of their lack of formal examinations.

At a couple of points during the interview the Careers Adviser asks Tommy if he has made any visits to universities, and encourages him to do so. Tommy sees real value in this, particularly as it will give him the opportunity to see the sports facilities, which will help him to assess the quality of what is on offer, and will aid his decision-making processes. The Careers Adviser also encourages him to make direct contact with universities (e.g. telephoning) regarding any queries he might have. By giving him the opportunity to see facilities, talk to staff and possibly students as well, such individual actions move Tommy closer to the activity system of HE and give him the chance to participate in it, albeit in a very peripheral way (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The interview moves on to the subject of Tommy's personal statement, and his sporting activities, which the Careers Adviser feels should be emphasised. This includes a discussion of issues related to the college's template for personal statements and making sure that Tommy has complied with their



seemingly rigid requirements. These requirements represent the rules in Engeström's triangle, and Tommy is asked to comply with them within the activity system of the college. The latter part of Tommy's interview focuses on some words of caution from the Careers Adviser regarding the need for consistency in course choice, and a recommendation that he avoid courses asking for science A' Levels. Towards the end of the interview Tommy mentions his desire to coach football, but seems to feel that this will not be realistic for him "I would like to coach at professional football level, but it's not very likely because of the pros" (p.12, lines 3-4). This idea is passed over by the Careers Adviser, as he states "Let's leave it at that." (p.12, line 5) and the interview finishes.

### **The post-interview**

During the post-interview I asked Tommy what he felt he had learned from it about his HE choice. His opening words were "It made it a bit clearer for me the way how hard it was going to be" (p.13, line 6). Tommy seems to have picked up very negative messages from his interview regarding what he hopes to do. "it showed me a lot about going for HNDs instead of a degree. Because it's two years and a degree, it's going to be hard to do a BTEC and HND and then go on to do a degree" (p.13, line 8-10). Tommy also seems to be thinking about a range of issues related to coping with change, when he says, "I thought I would cope, but now I'm thinking of two years without any exams, going to a different town, it will take quite a bit of getting used to" (p.13, lines 12-14). Tommy's interview seems to have raised lots of doubts in his mind, and he seems determined to do more research and "definitely pick out a few where I definitely know I will get the grades" (p.13, lines 26-27). His overall negative feelings seems to be underlined in his closing words of the post-interview, which were "just how hard it's going to be" (p.15, line 12).

I was particularly interested in Tommy's initial metaphor of joining dots, and took him back to this, in order to try and ascertain how he felt his picture had

changed, and whether or not he now felt that any of the dots had been joined. Following his interview Tommy felt that there were now several more dots in his picture, which had emerged during the discussion. The dots represent such things as HND courses that he now feels he wants to consider, different assessment methods used on courses and what will suit him best, competition for places, etc. and as such these can be seen to represent a mixture of both individual and societal factors. Tommy now finds the idea of doing an HND appealing and feels that in particular the assessment methods will suit him better. In terms of joining the dots, Tommy was emphatic in saying "I can see now that this is for me to do, and no-one else" (p.14, line 6), which shows strong evidence of his agency, and his overriding desire to do this for himself.

In analysing and interpreting Tommy's story, it is important to try and see it against the backdrop of the sixth form college and the circumstances of the time, in order to get a better understanding of what took place. Tommy's interview with the Careers Adviser came across as somewhat didactic and directive, giving Tommy little opportunity to contribute. The UCAS process and its technicalities (points, grades, competition for places etc.) seemed to take centre stage, rather than Tommy, and his desires, wishes and aspirations. In this sense the interview could not be described as client-centred (Rogers, 1965). However, there may be a number of reasons for this, which in themselves could be quite laudable, some of which were revealed in the interview I carried out with the Careers Adviser. As discussed in Chapter 3, the college is situated in inner London, and many of the students live in WPP (widening participation postcode) areas. Few have a family history of university study, almost all have attended state schools, and are just the kind of students that the government is hoping to attract into HE as part of its widening participation agenda. Although there are some students in the college who could be described as academic high flyers, many are not, and many students like Tommy have chosen vocational courses instead of A' Levels. Issues of realism come to the fore, and are raised by both students and the Careers



Adviser. In my interview with the Careers Adviser he talked of the need for students to learn strategies (in particular the management of risk) in order to ensure that they receive some offers, and do not get six rejections. He appears to be trying to protect students from being rejected from all six of their choices by encouraging them to apply to both a range of institutions and courses. In itself this appears laudable and in the interest of the students, but could such practices also be restrictive? In Tommy's case, do they ultimately serve Tommy's interests, or do they make him feel negative about his prospects and cause him to lower his aspirations?

The somewhat directive nature of Tommy's interview could also be explained in part by the timing of the research. The research took place in November, close to the deadline for UCAS applications (mid January, although the college like application forms to be completed by mid December). Certainly the pressure was on in terms of making decisions and getting applications in on time, and towards the end of Tommy's interview, deadlines for making decisions were discussed, and Tommy was clear about what he needed to do and by when. These deadlines are imposed by the mediating artefact of the UCAS process, which sends messages to students that deadlines are absolute and non-negotiable. The pressure that the deadline was bringing could have contributed to the directive nature of Tommy's interview. However, as all the interviews took place around this time, it is impossible to know whether or not interviews carried out earlier in the academic year were less didactic in character.

Tommy seems to get little opportunity to participate in the interview, which could be problematic in relation to literature on situated learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) in their description of legitimate peripheral participation argue that "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners" (p.29), and that "learning through legitimate peripheral participation takes place no matter which educational form provides a context for learning" (p.40). Even



though Tommy seems to get little opportunity to participate in his interview, Lave and Wenger would appear to argue that learning still takes place. However, through the example of the butchers, they also point to possible problems raised by issues of restricted access to participation. In such cases, access to a range of learning opportunities appears to be denied, for example by only allowing apprentices to carry out the most mundane tasks in the workplace. This prevents apprentices from participating fully in the community of practice, which "can prevent rather than facilitate learning" (p.76). In particular the didactic nature of their training is highlighted, as apprentices are taught skills that are seldom required in the workplace. In this scenario apprentices appear to learn what the masters allow them to be taught, instead of learning a range of tasks through participation.

Tommy's story shows that he has a desire to become a full participant in HE through studying for a degree in sport. However, the didactic nature of his interview poses questions and the work of Lave and Wenger may shed some light on these. Does the didactic nature of Tommy's interview actively deny him access to participation in the learning process of the interview, and to the opportunity of discovering where his dots are and joining them up? Does this didactic approach only allow Tommy to learn certain things (e.g. the value of HNDs) at the expense of others (e.g. the possibility of looking at degree courses that allow students to choose continuous assessment through course work rather than examinations)? Through his own agency, Tommy wants to find his own dots and join them, but does the didactic nature of his interview promote or prevent this? In effect, like the butchers, is he only going to discover those dots that the Careers Adviser shows him, at the expense of others that he may discover for himself through greater participation? Who is best able to find Tommy's dots, Tommy himself or the Careers Adviser?

This didactic approach also reveals the conflictual nature of the social practice of the interview, where Tommy's aspirations do not appear to be in line with

those of the Careers Adviser. Again this raises the whole issue of realism, and who decides what is realistic for Tommy. The interview data suggests that the Careers Adviser's inputs seem to have an impact on Tommy's thinking, and cause him to question his aims and aspirations. This is understandable as the Careers Adviser can be seen to have more knowledge of both the UCAS process and the HE system, and therefore more power within the interaction. He also has more power than Tommy in the activity system of the sixth form college. However, the inputs of the Careers Adviser also seem to have a reductionist effect on him, causing him to aim lower academically and to begin to feel that things will be very difficult for him, and much more difficult than he expected. This may be akin to Hodgkinson et al's (1996) horizons for action, where people choose to set their sights lower and conform to what society expects of them, rather than challenging it. The dynamic between self and society here (research question 3) appears to focus on society, which (through the Careers Adviser) appears to say to Tommy, "don't do a degree, you won't be up to it. People like you, who have done BTECs do much better on HNDs". Tommy's horizons for action change and become more limited as he conforms to society's expectations by applying for HNDs. We may then reasonably expect future studies on HE choice to find that the status quo of students from BTEC courses going on to study for HNDs rather than degrees, to be perpetuated.

From a situated viewpoint, if people do learn more through participation, how might things be different for Tommy if such a didactic approach were not taken, but a culture promoted where Tommy can participate fully in the guidance process, in order to find his own dots and join them up himself? Do Careers Advisers have to respond to the dynamic between self and society by encouraging people to conform to society's expectations? Indeed, if they are genuinely seeking to promote equality of opportunity, how might they be able to influence this dynamic differently? Would society continue to be the dominant factor, or would Tommy be in a position where he is developing



holistically in society? Instead of taking a didactic approach, if the Careers Adviser worked with Tommy in a more client-centred way, in order to enable him to find his own dots and join them up himself, how might Tommy's picture develop differently?

These are clearly hypothetical questions, but nonetheless ones that are worth considering. In seeking to promote a culture of active participation, no doubt a number of Tommy's dots would continue to emerge and, through his own agency, Tommy himself would decide which ones were important aspects of his picture and which were not. Some he may choose to pay more attention to than others, some would be individual (his interests, abilities etc.) and some would be societal (competition for places, expectations of where he as a BTEC student might study), but it would be up to Tommy himself to decide, as he finds his own dots and joins them up. Tommy's picture would then emerge and change over time, as he learns more about himself in his social context. Tommy's self is then developing in society through participation, and career guidance encourages him both to find and join his dots. In this supportive and enabling culture, Tommy can be free to consider and explore a range of possibilities that are proximal to him. Some of these possibilities may lie within the scope of what society expects, and some may not, and the Careers Adviser will help Tommy assess himself in relation to the possible options, and to reach some conclusions for himself. In this way the Careers Adviser can influence the dynamics between self and society, in encouraging Tommy to consider a range of options, and not simply encouraging Tommy to conform to what society expects (research question 3).

I am also left wondering how different Tommy's picture might be if he had greater opportunity to participate in the activity system of HE, perhaps through one of the Aimhigher initiatives. Again this is unknown, and such participation could encourage him to consider other options, or otherwise, depending on how positive he felt about the experience.



Tommy's metaphor of joining dots to make a picture of "me and my future", for me, provided an excellent description of my emerging understanding of the ZPD in a career guidance context. Before his interview, Tommy's picture was unclear. Various dots were already in place, and more emerged during his interview, and hence his picture changed. The ZPD can be seen as the difference between Tommy's picture before his career guidance interview and afterwards, as Tommy's holistic self develops in society. Tommy's picture is a picture of his emerging identity, which no doubt continued to develop in the ensuing months in college and indeed, I would expect it to emerge and change throughout his life as he constructs his career. However, when reflecting on Tommy's story, I am still left questioning whether in the interview observed, Tommy is drawing his own picture by both finding and joining dots, or whether the Careers Adviser is trying to draw it for him. I give my thoughts on this and develop this useful metaphor further in the final chapter, where my ideas in relation to it are articulated by way of conclusion.

Engeström (1999) describes activity systems as multivoiced, and having considered Tommy's story in detail, it is now important to consider the stories of the other students, so that different voices can be heard. Tommy's story reveals some important themes in the data and whilst it is not possible to write about all of them here, the following three are highlighted as being particularly important in relation to the research questions posed; agency, participation and the culture of the college. Some aspects of these stories are similar to those shown in Tommy's story, whilst others appear in sharp contrast. These three themes are now highlighted in the stories of two other students in the study.

### **The culture of the sixth form college - learning by participation or through instruction? The story of Dele**

Tommy's story revealed aspects of the college's culture, e.g. the didactic nature of the interview and the rigid rules and procedures in operation in the college. In the interview that I carried out with the Careers Coordinator, she described

the culture of the college as one of "intensive support", which she described as "vital, because many students do not get this support from home" (from notes on interview with Careers Coordinator). She also spoke of concerns that she has about stories she hears of the number of their students dropping out of university. The college keeps in touch informally with a number of its former students, and through these informal contacts, staff hear of former students who leave university before the end of their courses for a range of reasons. This is something that the college is keen to research. In her interview with me the Careers Coordinator said that she wondered of the students drop out because the culture of university is very different, and the students miss the intensive support offered in college.

By contrast the sessions within the college's careers education programme are designed with participation in mind. These sessions are not delivered by people with a careers specialism, but by sixty different tutors, and focus on the practicalities of the HE choice process and life in HE. In the words of the Careers Coordinator "the kinds of things we ask them to do are things they will have to be able to do for themselves in the future. Things like the budgeting exercise (they all enjoy this) they will have to do for real next year" (from notes on interview with Careers Coordinator).

This discussion prompted various questions in my mind, particularly in relation to what the term intensive support means for both staff and students. Here the story of Dele is illuminating. Dele (short for Obadele) is a mature student in his late twenties, who has returned to college to study for A' Levels in the hope of gaining entry to university. I would describe Dele as a highflying student, and he is hoping to study for a degree in Economics or a related area at the London School of Economics (LSE). He is studying for A' Levels in Economics, History and Politics and is predicted to gain three A grades.



Dele has had some difficulties in recent months, and has missed college due to illness and having to spend some time in hospital. He is anxious to complete his UCAS form, and feels he is late doing this because of his health issues. In his pre-interview Dele speaks of his desire to study Economics, but is concerned that his choices may be restricted as he is not studying A' Level Maths. Dele shows evidence of agency (research question 1) and as a result of contacting universities directly and speaking to his Economics teacher (who studied at LSE), he has decided to apply for an Economics related course like Economic History. When I asked Dele what he was hoping to gain from the interview with the Careers Adviser, Dele said he wanted to know "if my choices are good and if I stand a chance of getting into a university" (p.1, line 10).

In his interview with the Careers Adviser Dele shows that he has done lots of research into his degree course choice, and is clear about which courses require Maths. After an initial discussion of career prospects following a degree, Dele's interview, like Tommy's, soon focuses on the technical aspects of his university application (e.g. points, grades, consistency of course choice etc.) and in particular which universities Dele will apply to that may ultimately offer him a place that he will accept as his conditional insurance. Along with the LSE, Dele is interested in City University, University College London, Warwick and Royal Holloway.

Various factors seem to be influencing Dele's HE choice (research question 2). He wants to study in London, in order to be close to the support of his family, which seems to be evidence of Reay et al's (2001) localism. He hopes to enter a career in finance, and sees the LSE as somewhere that has good contacts with the City of London, including its employers. Following a discussion about competition for places, the Careers Adviser says "but I wouldn't put all your eggs in one basket, in the sense that applying to places all demanding such high grades. Maybe pick a couple at that level, a couple a bit lower, like City



and ... (he hesitates)” and Dele says “Kingston?” to which the Careers Adviser replies “yes” (p.10, lines 22-24). Later on, the Careers Adviser makes more suggestions by saying “you might be happier doing an Arts based course rather than a BSc, which these Economics courses are” (p.11, line 35-37). This serves again to demonstrate the didactic nature of Dele’s interview and echoed the discussion of HNDs in Tommy’s interview. Here society (through the Careers Adviser) seems to be trying to exert a level of influence over Dele’s self, in order to try and make him conform to its expectations (research question 3).

Towards the end of Dele’s interview he has some queries about some specific details of his UCAS application, and is unsure about what to write in the section headed ‘qualifications not yet completed’. All students at the college are given a copy of the college’s step-by-step guide on how to complete a UCAS form, which was referred to in most of the interviews I observed. At this point the Careers Adviser asks if Dele has the guide, and when he says he has, he refers Dele to it. However Dele is still unsure what to write, and is told rather abruptly to follow the formula in the guide.

Because of circumstances at the time of the research, Dele was unable to stay for his post-interview immediately following his interview, as he had a lesson on his timetable that he could not miss. This in itself seems to point to a rigid culture, where students are expected to conform at all cost to what the college requires. As a result Dele’s post-interview was carried out a week later, by which time he had attended a drop-in session to discuss his completed practice UCAS form. In his post-interview Dele explained that he had included Kingston as one of his choices on his practice UCAS form, but had then removed it following a conversation with the Careers Coordinator at the drop-in session. He explained that she had said “with my grades I shouldn’t apply for Kingston, that it would be better if I applied for a lot of good universities like Royal Holloway” (p.15, lines 1-3). Unlike the case of Tommy and HNDs,

here Dele is being encouraged to aim higher, although it still appears that he is being told what to do. Dele conforms, even though he is a mature and very able student, who has researched his choices well and knows that Royal Holloway require Maths A' Level, which he does not have.

So what does the story of Dele tell us about the culture of the college, and in particular about what is meant by "intensive support"? It became clear over time that the college's culture of intensive support seems to equate to a didactic approach where staff give advice in a directive way, making suggestions that students are expected to follow. Many students comply with this and even look to staff to provide this kind of support, as Dele showed in the pre-interview, and in this way the didactic culture of the college grows. The college's own guide to the UCAS process is an artefact of the didactic culture, in that it sets out in a detailed and step-by-step way what students have to do in order to complete the UCAS process. Dele was not alone in asking questions about the detail in the guide, and equally not alone in the rather abrupt response he received. The culture of the college as manifested in the guide seemed to be "we have told you what to do in the guide, so if you are still unsure, you need to read it again".

Dele's story and in particular what it shows of the didactic culture of the college raises similar questions in my mind as those raised by Tommy's story, as discussed earlier in the chapter. If the culture of the college leads students to the position where they expect to be told what to do, how does this prepare them for their future in HE? Does this didactic culture lead to dependency on the part of students, making them reliant on the advice of staff in order to find and join their dots, rather than enabling them to make their own decisions and do things for themselves? Could this be one reason why students drop out of HE, because they no longer have people around them showing them what to do? Is the culture of HE so different that students are ill prepared to cope?



Again these questions are hypothetical, and could be the substance of another study.

Tommy and Dele were both advised to consider their HE choices differently and both complied, but in different ways. Tommy considered HNDs and lowered his aspirations, whereas Dele aimed higher by replacing Kingston with Royal Holloway. They can both be seen as complying with the college's didactic culture. But not all students in the study complied with the advice given. I will now move on to discuss the contrasting stories of Gloria and Errol and in particular what their stories show of the role of individual agency.

### **Individual agency and the story of Gloria**

This section begins with the story of Gloria and moves on to the story of Errol and considers what each has to say about individual agency.

In her pre-interview, Gloria explains that she has been asked by the Careers Coordinator to attend for an interview, because she (the Careers Coordinator) "was worried about me not gaining a C or above in Science and that that might not allow me to do my course" (p.1, lines 9-11). Gloria complies with this request, but is clear from the outset of the pre-interview that her view is different from that of the Careers Coordinator. Gloria is studying for A' Levels in Sociology, English and Performing Arts, and is re-taking GCSE English. Like Tommy, Gloria is interested in sport and wants to do a degree in Sports Science. Gloria has researched the courses and says that they are looking for English and Maths at GCSE, and that they like people to have a background in Sport. Gloria shows a high level of agency (research question 1) in describing all the things she has done in relation to finding out about Sports Science, and her tone is adamant when she states "I don't have any queries. I was just asked to book a careers appointment. I know what I want to do and if it does come up, I am hoping to get my Maths. If I don't get my Maths, I do reckon that I will be accepted based on my sports background"



(p.2, lines 25-28). Gloria is a keen sportswoman, who plays netball, basketball, badminton and volleyball, and whilst at school she ran for her county for four years.

Like the others, Gloria's interview with the Careers Adviser has a similar emphasis on detailed and specific course requirements, but Gloria's response contrasts with that of Tommy and Dele, as she remains committed to her goal of studying Sports Science, in spite of the advice given. The overall tone of the interview becomes very negative, as the Careers Adviser suggests she looks at alternatives, like sports courses without science in the title, or keeping sport as an interest whilst studying for something else (e.g. Sociology). The Careers Adviser even states at one point "Does all that sound very negative to you?" (p. 11, line 35) and Gloria responds by saying "yes". The conflictual nature of Gloria's interview is clear, as her views differ from those of the Careers Adviser. In the latter parts of the interview, Gloria appears to shut down, and resorts to one-word answers, and, unsurprisingly when the Careers Adviser asks her if she then has any questions, she says "no" (p.12, line 19) and the interview ends.

In the post-interview I was interested to hear Gloria's reactions to the interview and to listen to what her next steps would be. She appeared agitated and said "this whole thing about Science. I know universities say they want it, they want GCSE or AS or A level, and if I don't have the required qualifications, they will take into account my sports background, which is pretty good, and so I still think there's a chance I might get in. I still want to do it." (p.13, line, 5-9). Through her agency Gloria has drawn some of her dots (using Tommy's metaphor) so clearly and deliberately and the advice being given seems to be asking her to erase them or change them. The dots are so important to Gloria that she does not want to comply, even though she understands the advice being given. It appears that sport is such a key part of Gloria's identity, she wants to pursue her goal at all costs, even if this means being rejected. Doing

a degree in Sports Science is an inherent part of Gloria's self with possibility (Bruner, 1996), which means that at least she has to try. By doing so, she is showing herself to be an agent in control of her own action, although obviously not in control of the outcome. Whatever the outcome, Bruner (1996) would argue that through this experience Gloria's picture will emerge and her self will develop as "Success and failure are principal nutrients in the development of selfhood" (p.36). Gloria's story shows that agency should not, and indeed cannot be dismissed, and that her picture is her own, and one that she will continue to construct in the light of her experiences. Bruner (ibid) would also argue that in the future Gloria may need support and an opportunity to reflect upon her experiences through "discourse that permits one to find out why or how things didn't work out as planned" (p.37), but meanwhile, time will tell.

In reflecting on Gloria's story, I was again prompted to question the didactic approach taken in her interview and to debate issues of realism for Gloria. Ultimately, who decides whether Gloria's goal is realistic or not? From the point of view of Gloria's agency, she is going to try and achieve a place on a course in Sports Science. Society (through the college staff) may give her negative messages about her prospects (research question 2), but she is still determined to try. Because of her strong sense of agency, the conflicts and contradictions seem to cause Gloria to want to persevere, and ultimately they may be the very things that determine her success. Obviously if she gives up her ambitions, she will not succeed in reaching her goal, but despite the negative messages that are seeking to erase or make her amend her dots, Gloria is still going to continue to try and find her dots herself and join them up. Ultimately it appears that Gloria's individual actions, and the object, i.e. whether or not she gains a place to study Sports Science, is what will determine what is realistic for her.

We now move on to the stories of the other students in the study, to see what these might add to what has been brought out so far.



### **The stories of Errol, Grace and Sandra – some similarities and differences**

In this section the stories of Errol, Grace and Sandra are told in order to bring out some similarities and differences between them, and the stories told so far. In his pre-interview Errol explains that he is hoping to find out more about applying for courses at university and in particular “which is good for me, basically the entry requirements. And in general what sort of options I have with my AS and A’ Levels” (p.1 lines 5-7). He is studying for A’ Levels in Maths and Computing and has AS levels in Business Studies and Physics. Like other students in the study, Errol shows evidence of individual agency (research question 1) in the research he has carried out, but also shows that a range of other factors is having an influence on his choices (research question 2). In particular Errol wants to study in London, so that he will be close to the support of his family and be able to live at home. He seems influenced by issues of localism as identified by Reay et al (2001), and also seems to be quite concerned about the content of his reference from college.

Errol raises several issues in the early part of his interview with the Careers Adviser. He reiterates his desire to study in London for support “Because my family is in London, and I don’t really fancy living by myself or with friends” (p.4 lines 23-24), but also for financial reasons, “because I don’t really fancy going to work just to pay my house fee ... I feel that might hinder my education, if I keep working like and getting worried about being away from London.” (p.5, lines 3-9). There appears to be a range of factors influencing Errol’s choices (research question 2). As a result Errol has identified a range of institutions (four new universities and two old) in London that offer the kinds of computing courses in which he is interested. The Careers Adviser encourages Errol to find out more about Middlesex University in particular, as he feels it could involve a very long journey each day. Errol’s brother went to the University of Greenwich.



Errol's interview then continues with lots of detail regarding grades and points and the different requirements of each of the institutions, in particular, ones such as Imperial, who in the words of the Careers Adviser "would prefer 21 units, so in other words they probably want people who are doing 3A2s this year and have got an AS from last year" (p.8, line 22-24). As part of this, the issue of Errol's progress in college and his predicted grades is discussed, and Errol becomes rather heated when the Careers Adviser shares these predictions with him. Having discovered that he is predicted to get a grade E in Computing, Errol says "Honestly, I think this is incorrect. I really do, because generally from my progress reviews, they say I have improved, and I have got all Bs for my work. So I am assuming that is incorrect. And because I am re-taking some modules in AS to push up my grades, I think that it is really incorrect" (p.8, line 28 – p.9, line 2). Later on in the interview Errol again becomes agitated about his predictions, and says "I am going to complain to them" (p.11, line 31-32) and he perceptively points to influence of staff in the college when he says "I'll go and talk to them because this is crushing my application and limiting my options" (p.12, line 6). As in the case of Dele, the didactic culture of the college seems to come to the fore again, and unlike Dele, it is clear that Errol does not want to comply with this. He signals the power that staff have when predicting grades, both within the activity system of the college, and beyond its boundaries into HE, and this is clearly something with which Errol is uncomfortable. The interview continues and concludes with more discussion regarding the technical aspects of Errol's application and the identification of the University of Kingston as another possible option.

In the post-interview Errol is quick to say that "I had problems with my work" (p.17, line 7) and he appears to realise that universities will look at his work so far. He is still happy with his choices, but will probably not include Imperial College in his final choices because of their requirements. Taking him back to the discussion about his predicted grades, he said "When that predicted grade was filled in, it was before I believe I was working hard. And now the teachers

say I have improved a lot ... But I need to talk to the teacher about improving the grade predicted, because if they put E down, the unis won't be too impressed." (p.18, lines 12-17).

Errol shows evidence of agency (research question 1) through his determination to improve his performance in college and achieve his goal of a place at university. However, his teacher predictions (research question 2) raise issues of power within the division of labour. In the activity system of the sixth form college, staff writing references can be seen as having greater power than the students. They have the power to write references, which can greatly affect the individual student's prospects of gaining a place (or otherwise) on a course. It is clear that Errol is mindful of this and he is determined to discuss this with the relevant staff. Errol's story shows again that although he has the potential to develop through his own agency, other factors are also at work in the process, and the dynamic between agency and society appears again (as in the case of Tommy) to reinforce the requirements of the HE system, as shown through Errol's decision to exclude Imperial College from his choices (research question 3). Like others in the study, Errol's picture is developing through his interaction with the Careers Adviser. There is clear conflict between the way he sees himself (as someone who did not work hard in year 12, but who is now trying to make amends) and the way the college sees him, and through his discussions with staff, his picture might be amended further. We now move on to the story of Grace.

Grace is interested in degree courses in Pharmaceutical Science, and like other students in the study she is keen to find out more information regarding her choices. In the pre-interview, she expresses some concerns and seems to be seeking reassurance "that I'll cope with the work" (p.1, line 6). She is currently studying for a BTEC National in Science. She is attracted to Pharmaceutical Science because of its links with medicine, and it is something she hopes to pursue in the future (research question 1).



In her interview with the Careers Adviser, Grace's performance and interest in Science (Chemistry, Physics and Biology) is discussed, including how she feels about each of the subject areas. She says, "I seem to prefer the biological science at the moment, although I have strength in all of them and none of them is weaker than the other" (p.5, line 18-19). Grace then expresses doubts about studying on a course that involves lots of Chemistry, and the focus of the interview moves to Biological Sciences.

There are many similarities between Tommy's story and that of Grace. Grace's interview turns to the subject of HNDs, which Grace herself has not actively considered, but which the Careers Adviser encourages her to look at as "very often BTEC students achieve far better success going onto an HND" (p.11, line 34 – p.12, line 1). Assessment methods are also raised as in the case of Tommy (research question 2).

In the post-interview Grace says that the interview has "sort of made me re-think my choices" (p.15, line 6) and that "it made it clear that Chemistry is going to be a bigger part of it (Pharmaceutical Science) than I thought" (p.15, line 10-11). She expresses a preference for Biology, and, like Tommy, appears to have picked up somewhat negative messages about degree courses, that they are "harder to cope with if you're doing BTEC, because of the different ways of assessment" (p.16, line 6-8). She is now actively considering HNDs and states "I probably don't cope that well under pressure" (p.16, line 27) when she speaks of exams. Like Tommy, the dynamic between agency and society (research question 3) again appears to favour society and, within the didactic culture of the college and the interview, Grace appears happy to comply. As a result, Grace's picture of herself changes from a student aiming for degree courses to one who has lowered her sights to HNDs. We conclude this section by considering the story of Sandra.



Of all the students that took part in the study, Sandra seemed to contribute most to the discussions, and seemed generally confident and gregarious in nature. She is taking A' Levels in English, Sociology and Media Studies and during the pre-interview said that she is keen "to talk to him about what's accessible to me. I've actually got my predicted grades and I want to know actually which universities I would be able to get into, whether my choices are realistic" (p.1, lines 5-7). Realism seems high on Sandra's agenda, and whilst wanting to know the views of the Careers Adviser, through her own agency (research question 1) she is also keen to decide for herself what she might be able to achieve. "I have to find out the grade requirements for each of the courses, so when I thought about them I had to find out about my predicted grades too, and see for myself whether or not I think I can achieve the grades that are predicted and whether I feel it's realistic that I will get those grades. I mean, there's no point in me applying to a university where the grades are too high, or setting myself a target that's too low where I can actually exceed it." (p. 1, lines 29-34).

She expresses her concerns about realism in her opening words in the interview with the Careers Adviser. She is interested in courses in English and Philosophy and would like to study outside the London area (research question 2), although quickly expresses some concerns about other factors (research question 2) and in particular coping with change "I was thinking that I might like to study away from home, I'm not that used to adjusting to new situations, but I know I have to." (p.3, line 9-12). Sandra speaks freely in the early part of the interview and participates actively in the discussion, particularly in relation to her hopes of becoming a journalist in the future. However, as the interview progresses, and the discussion turns towards the technical aspects of her application (grades, points etc.) the balance of the dialogue shifts in favour of the Careers Adviser.

Sandra is predicted to gain a grade A in English, B in Sociology and C in Media Studies. She is interested in applying to Manchester, Brunel, Leeds, Kings College London, Birmingham and Queen Mary's College London and is particularly keen on Manchester. After discussing the entry requirements of these institutions the Careers Adviser comments "Is that all sounding negative?" (p.10, line 1) and Sandra responds by saying "It is and it isn't, because at the end of the day the whole point is to be realistic, but if I feel like there's no point in me setting standards that I can jump over. I feel like I always need to aim higher, and then if I get a disappointment, then at least I know I've tried" (p.10, line 2-5). Following this the Careers Adviser encourages Sandra to include two institutions offering lower grades (new universities), and as in the case of Tommy, he seems to be trying to protect Sandra from receiving a number of rejections.

In the post-interview Sandra shows some of the ways in which she is trying to think through her own aspirations and the requirements of universities (research question 3), but states that "it's not a case of changing my choices, because my first choices are those that require the highest grades" (p.18, lines 3-4). She then speaks of the messages she gets about different institutions (research question 2) and "the prestigious universities for example that he was talking about. Those universities, I still definitely want to go there." (p.18, line 10-12). Unlike Dele, Grace and Tommy, who appear to comply with the advice given, like Gloria, Sandra is keen to pursue her own goals, and the dynamic between her agency and society appears more finely balanced (research question 3). Sandra seems less affected by the didactic culture of the college, and appears to want to draw her picture for herself, although she does concede to the perceived need to include a range of institutions in her application to HE.

Having examined the stories of the students, the culture of the college and aspects of individual agency, I will now return to the literature (in particular

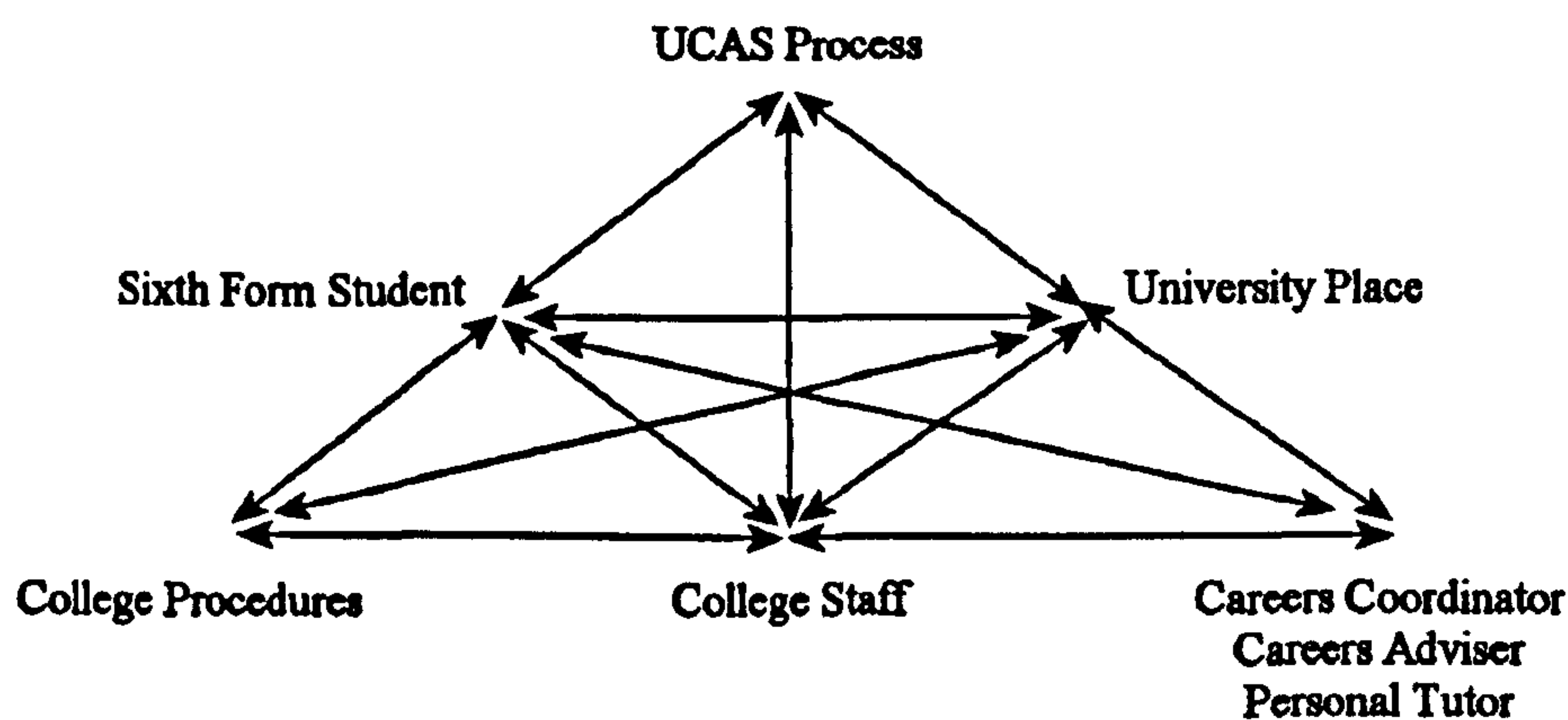


the work of Lave and Wenger and activity theory and the work of Engeström) in order to complete my analysis.

### **The literature and the research questions – a concluding analysis**

In the final part of the chapter I return to the literature review detailed in Chapter 2, in order to seek to draw some conclusions regarding how far the findings shown above support the literature or otherwise. The focus of the discussion here will be the ZPD from a collectivist viewpoint, legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and activity theory (Engeström, 1995), and what further insights they can bring to the research questions.

In Chapter 2 (page 65) the sixth form college is considered as an activity system, and various aspects of it are described. Figure 2.2 is repeated here for ease of reference.



**Figure 2.2 The activity system of the Sixth Form College**

The students in the study are making their HE choices within the activity system of the college and, as Engeström (2001) points out, the actions of the students can only be understood “when interpreted against the background of the entire activity system” (p.136). The stories of Tommy, Dele and Grace reveal aspects of the somewhat didactic culture of the activity system of the



sixth form college, and this raises questions regarding how this culture comes about and how it is perpetuated. Tommy (and other students too), as the subject of the activity system, is pulled and pushed by the demands of the UCAS process (with its strict deadlines, procedures, points tariffs etc.). If the students are going to be successful in gaining places at university, they have to comply with the UCAS process and there is little room for debate. The UCAS process serves to keep universities at a distance from Tommy, to the point where Tommy has very little direct contact with them. The rules, as shown through things like the college's own guide to applying to university, the template for personal statements etc., emanate from the UCAS process, and are designed to help the students succeed by conforming to what is required. Both the UCAS process itself and the college's guide provide a strong impetus on students to conform.

Dele's story reveals some interesting insights into the division of labour within the activity system of the college. Dele discusses his university choice with the Careers Adviser, who encourages him to include Kingston in his choices. However, after speaking to the Careers Coordinator at the drop in session, Dele decides to follow her advice and not to apply to Kingston, thereby ignoring the advice of the Careers Adviser. Within the careers department there appears to be a suggestion of a hierarchy, where students follow the advice of the Careers Coordinator (who is a senior manager within the college) rather than that of the Careers Adviser. Within the activity system of the college the Careers Coordinator seems to have greater power, including the power to tell Gloria to attend an interview and, in general, the didactic culture places the power in the division of labour with the staff and could serve actively to disempower students.

This didactic culture raises more questions regarding who knows what is best for the students in the study. Who knows what is best for Tommy, and that an HND course will definitely suit him better than a degree? If an HND course is

best, then best for whom? Best for Tommy, based on Roger's (1965) core conditions of unconditional positive regard, or best for the college in encouraging him to apply for a course where he has a greater certainty of gaining a place, which subsequently shows the college in a positive light in their statistics?

The didactic culture of the college raises conflicts and contradictions, as shown through the stories of Gloria and Errol, but also suppresses them as shown through students like Tommy who choose to conform. When contradictions are suppressed, change will not occur and the status quo will remain. The culture can also be seen to discourage participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) but even here, like the butchers, Tommy does learn through a level of participation. I am now left wondering how much more he might have learnt if he had been allowed to participate to a fuller extent in the career guidance interview. What would Tommy's picture look like by the end of his interview and how would it be different if he had been allowed and enabled to find and draw his dots for himself, rather than be led by the Careers Adviser?

Despite the didactic culture, Tommy's agency (research question 1) comes across clearly in his desire to both find and join his dots. The ZPD can be seen as the difference between Tommy's picture before his interview and afterwards, as he develops as a whole person. But in drawing his picture Tommy is influenced by what goes on around him as various factors influence his HE choice, although the culture of the college seems to influence him more than the factors highlighted by Reay et al (2001), (research question 2). He is developing in society and not in a vacuum, and needs to be allowed both to find and join his dots for himself. Tommy is trying to draw his picture by finding and joining dots, which can be seen to represent a blend of both individual and societal factors. Ultimately Tommy will draw his own picture, which represents Tommy's self in society (research question 3). This will lead him to a position where he can make decisions for himself, and client-centred



guidance practice will be enhanced (research question 4). By drawing his own picture, Tommy will ultimately prepare himself for life at university (and life beyond), where the culture he finds himself in will no doubt be different to that of the sixth form college.

The final question I wish to consider is how the two activity systems (the activity system of the college and that of HE) interact, and the answer in this particular case seems to be not very much. Indeed I am left with the impression that the HE activity system interacts with the activity system of the college largely to the extent that the UCAS process allows, which encourages little direct contact (other than the occasional telephone call and e mail) between the two systems. The individual students get opportunities to participate in HE through such things as visits and the HE fair. These are clearly important events for the students and key in their decision-making processes, but in effect they provide students with minimal opportunity to participate in the activity system of HE. The final chapter will discuss ways in which the two systems could interact more effectively, shown through an example of good practice I recently came across when liaising with a particular university.

In this chapter I have described, analysed and begun to interpret the data gathered in the study through the story of Tommy and others, and have evaluated it in relation to both the literature and research questions. The focus of the next chapter is evaluation of the research process, including its strengths, weaknesses and limitations.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation of any research study is important, in order to identify what went well, and to seek areas for potential development and improvement in the future. Particularly in the case of a qualitative study, where the outcomes cannot be predicted beforehand, I needed to work with the data and the literature, in order to allow understandings to emerge (Creswell, 2003), and during such a process, it is inevitable that thoughts and plans will change over time. This chapter seeks to evaluate the study undertaken, focusing on both the positive aspects of the study, its weaknesses and limitations, the possibilities for improvements and opportunities for further research.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the impact of my own biography in relation to my research, and the ways in which this influenced both what I did and the ways in which I interpreted what I saw. This is followed by a consideration of some questions such as what might have happened if things had been approached differently, for example by adopting a different research method, using different research techniques or by studying different cases. The setting for the research and the political context are then considered, and the chapter concludes with a summary of some possibilities for further research.

In this chapter I will use the framework of Layder's (1993) map as outlined on pages 14 to 15 in order to evaluate my research.

*Self* – my own biography and what I bring to the research process as a white woman from a working class background, via my professional experience, all set in social context.

*Situated activity* – the research study and the interactions with A'level students, the Careers Adviser and Careers Co-ordinator, during which I explore the relationship between self and society.

*Setting* – an examination of college policy and professional issues within the research environment.

*Context* – the broader policy context of guidance and in particular, HE choice. I will also refer to Engeström's triangle model in seeking to evaluate my research as an activity system as outlined in Chapter 3 on pages 104 to 105, and to Tommy's metaphor of dots in order to conceptualise my own development through the research process.

Bearing in mind both the constructivist and reflexive nature of the study, and that "all findings are constructions, personal views of reality, open to change and reconstruction" (Banister et al, 1994, p.151), it is fair to say that other readers and researchers looking at the data could reach different interpretations. The descriptions put forward, the stories of the students and details of my own biography are offered as a means of enabling others to understand how interpretations were made and conclusions reached. They allow readers the opportunity to reanalyse the material, in order both to assess my interpretations and to develop alternative ones.

### **Self - my biography**

Chapter 3 began with a discussion of what I felt to be key aspects of my biography in relation to my research. As the study progressed I understood more and more about the impact of my own attitudes and values on the research process, and the need to be explicit about my own position, in order to show readers where my understandings and interpretations were coming from. Layder's (1993) map is designed to "convey the 'textured' or interwoven nature of different levels and dimensions of social reality" (p.7) and over time I found the dimension of self, as shown through "biographical experience and social involvements" (p.8) to be both central to and integrated within all aspects of my research, and inseparable from it.



My own view of myself as a researcher developed throughout the study, as I worked on finding my own dots in relation to research and joining them up. Some of the key dots I have found in relation to myself as a researcher include my need for time, space and supportive critique in order to persevere in the process and emerge with new insights into theory and practice. This needs to be coupled with a belief in myself, my own agency and in the inherent value of my ideas. Other dots relate to my ongoing understanding of myself in relation to career guidance practice, e.g. a reinforcement of my personal commitments to issues of equality of opportunity and social justice, my belief in the value of client-centred career guidance, my trust in people to make decisions for themselves and my desire to see people grow in their understandings of themselves.

Within the activity system of my own research as depicted through Engeström's triangle described in Chapter 3 on pages 104 to 105, I placed myself as the subject of the system and the focus of the analysis. Tensions and contradictions within the activity system of my research have helped me reflect on my progress, and have brought about developments in my emerging understandings of the ZPD in a career guidance context. I have received feedback from a variety of people within the community of the activity system, which has helped me to reflect on different points of view and to take different perspectives into account. Sometimes these views challenged things I had taken for granted, helping me to look at them with a fresh eye, whilst at other times they have served to confirm my views. Participation has been key in enabling me to make progress, and as time went on, I actively sought opportunities to contribute to groups, such as giving a presentation to my research group, and to groups of students, and taking part in discussions afterwards. Whilst I always found these challenging, equally I always found that I gained a lot and my thinking became sharper and often more focused, as, through interactions with others I constructed new knowledge. Just like the students I needed a supportive culture in which to develop.



I also experienced tensions and contradictions between my own biographical experiences and the stories of the students. After observing their career guidance interviews, I found myself reflecting on my own past experiences of university choice, and the somewhat directive (and negative) advice I received at school, and the subsequent regrets I had about some of the choices I made. If someone had allowed and helped me to explore my own wishes and desires, enabling me both to find and join my own dots, maybe the outcomes would have been different. There was further tension between what I understand as effective client-centred career guidance and the somewhat didactic practice I observed, and this again challenged my thinking.

### **Situated activity – the research study itself**

Having the opportunity to undertake the study has in itself been a key part of my ongoing development as a researcher. The study itself, and in particular the interactions I had with the students, enabled me to understand more about the possible application of the ZPD concept to career guidance and the development of individuals within their social context. The analysis revealed some problems with the data, and in particular the directive nature of the interviews observed. However, it is important in a research situation to try and gain some understanding regarding why things might be happening, rather than simply being negative about what was seen.

In Chapter 1 on page 12 I raised a fundamental question regarding the scope of the study, and it is important to reflect on this in order to try and evaluate my decision to focus on the collectivist interpretation of the ZPD. It is now evident that to aim to consider all three groups of interpretations of the ZPD was too broad for the scope of this study. The data collected shows the somewhat didactic character of the career guidance interviews observed, which appears to have a reductionist effect on the students and their HE choices. On reflection it became clear that to focus on the scaffolding interpretation of the ZPD would have brought this reductionism to the fore, and would have echoed

Guile and Young's (1998) description of scaffolding as normative. My decision to focus on the collectivist interpretation of the ZPD and in particular the possibilities for social transformation, served well my interest in, and commitment to, issues of equality of opportunity and social justice, and ultimately left me feeling positive about this decision.

The nature of the practice observed made me question a range of issues, including the method I chose for the study. The interview data and the character of the career guidance interviews I observed was not what I expected to see and, in such a situation, to seek out an alternative research situation in order to try and gather data that confirmed my ideas, would be clearly unethical and narrow minded. However, it is possible that adopting a different research method (e.g. action research) could have yielded different data. In action research, where research is carried out by practitioners themselves into their own practices (Kemmis, 1988), the data gathered could have been very different. If I had adopted this method, I would have carried out all the interviews (the pre-interviews, the interviews and the post-interviews) myself as a "complete participant" (Creswell, 2003, p.188), and by doing so, I could have encouraged the students to play a more active part in the process of the career guidance interview. As a career guidance professional myself, it would have been possible to gain access to a situation (probably in the same sixth form college) where I could have undertaken a number of interviews myself, in order to explore the applicability of the ZPD and other related concepts.

However, an action research approach would have been inappropriate for a number of reasons. First, it is now a number of years since I have actively practised in the field, and my work could be perceived as dated. In addition the work could also be criticised for being unnatural, in that it may work well to undertake such work in a research setting, where perhaps two interviews would be carried out in one day, but practitioners in the field could argue that in the everyday world, such an approach could not work, when Careers



Advisers often need to interview much larger numbers of students per day. The research might be deemed unrealistic and inapplicable to practice on such grounds. Such action research could also be criticised for its potential to steer the findings in the desired direction of the researcher. If I had carried out the interviews myself in such a way as to foster evidence for the application of the ZPD etc. would I simply be looking for what I wanted to see, as distinct from seeing what the data showed?

Another possible method that could have been utilised in this study is participatory action research (PAR). PAR involves a group (or groups) of people working together in a research setting, in order to “create forums in which people can join one another as co-participants in the struggle to remake the practices in which they interact” (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998, p.22). Using this method the group (or groups) works together in order to bring about changes in practice, and PAR is emancipatory and critical in character, as the capacity of groups to bring about change is often greater than that of individuals. In this particular respect PAR would appear to be particularly appropriate for this study with its focus on collectivist interpretations of the ZPD, equality of opportunity, social justice and transformatory change.

A PAR research method would have required a group of people within the sixth form college committed to a process of change, within which I could have participated as a researcher, and this is where the method becomes problematic in this case. Data analysis showed that people within the college could be somewhat resistant to change when operating within its didactic culture, and two particular examples come to mind. One is when the Careers Coordinator refused to give me a copy of the careers education programme, as she was worried that it could be plagiarised. This showed an apparent lack of acceptance of sharing good practice, along with a lack of interest in the possibilities for improvement. The second was when one student in the study did not understand an aspect of the UCAS system as described in the college's



pack. She was told to read the pack again, and there was no suggestion that it was possible that the pack was unclear and could be revised in the light of her feedback. A PAR group in this case would have included the Careers Coordinator, the Careers Adviser, students and some of the personal tutors delivering the careers education programme, and myself, but without a shared commitment to change, this method would have been unworkable. However, within my own work situation such a group is already in existence in the form of the Programme Management Group, where staff and students work closely together to overcome any difficulties through effective two-way communication. Here PAR could provide a very useful framework for research into such things as curriculum development and further enhancement of the student experience.

The case study method adopted meant that the research took place in a natural setting, with typical activities that could be seen in all sorts of sixth forms and colleges elsewhere. Although time spent in the college was limited, valuable insights into the culture of both the college and the careers department were gained through both the observation of the career guidance interviews, and the reflections of the students regarding what they felt they had gained from the process. The college's timetable, like most other settings for A' Level study, is pressurised and students are asked to attend their career guidance interviews in their private study periods. Thankfully some were also willing to spend some of their free time with me in the pre- and post-interviews, despite the pressure of full-time A' Level study. It is also important to emphasise that my interests at the outset of the study, as shown in Chapter 1 on page 6, were in the formal guidance interview. Whilst recognising that guidance itself is much broader than this, I was particularly interested in exploring a number of career guidance interviews and the ways in which understandings of the ZPD, situated approaches and activity theory could enhance practice. The study's focus on the career guidance interviews of the students provided the means for me to carry out this exploration. On reflection, ascertaining the final destinations of

the students in the study could have been useful in providing more data on the ways in which they were drawing their pictures of self. In order to gather this information it would have been necessary to get the written permission of the students concerned, and this was not done at the time because of the study's focus on the career guidance interview as distinct from the progress of the students over a period of time.

The study itself offered some good opportunities to practise some research techniques, such as interviewing, observation and the analysis of various documents. Tommy was the first student to take part in the study, and he used his dots metaphor within the first few minutes of his pre-interview. This showed me the very real need to listen carefully from the outset, and to be open to hear the perspectives of others. However, it was only later during the data analysis process that Tommy's metaphor really began to take on a clear significance. The adoption of semi-structured interviewing proved quite useful in gathering data, and worked quite well within the time constraints of the pre- and post-interviews. This approach allowed the students to talk freely as they responded to my open questions and some supplementary ones, and the interviews were not constrained by a restrictive interview schedule.

The research instruments in Appendix 1 now appear dated, and in particular their references to other theories of learning show how far the study has progressed in focus since the relatively early days of data collection. The schedules for the pre- and post-interviews were useful, in that they provided me with a range of open questions to encourage the students to speak freely about both their HE choice and their interview with the Careers Adviser. I found the observation schedules designed for use when observing the career guidance interviews to be limited in their usefulness, other than providing a springboard for initial data analysis. However, they would have been very useful if the recording equipment had failed in some way. They may have been more useful if they had been designed in two parts, with a space for



making descriptive notes against the words identified in the dialogue itself, and another space for making reflective notes on my own thoughts as they occurred during the observations (Creswell, 2003). Schedules designed in this way would have kept a record of the ways in which my thoughts were developing at specific points during the study, as well as a basic record of the interviews themselves.

It is also important to reflect on my own presence within the data collection process, and on one level it is impossible to know exactly what effect my presence had. For example, how different would the career guidance interviews have been if they had simply been recorded, without my being present? Would they have been more or less didactic in character? How inhibited were the students and the Careers Adviser by my presence and the presence of the tape recorder? Most of these questions do not have answers, but it is still important to think about how things could have been done differently. Instead of observing the interviews and recording them, I could have asked the Careers Adviser to record them without me being present. However, my ability to carry out the post-interview, without knowing any detail of the career guidance interview at that point would have been questionable.

The process of transcribing the interviews was lengthy, but provided an invaluable way of enabling me to become intimately acquainted with the detail of the data, which greatly aided subsequent data analysis. However, this lengthy process did then mean that the students in the study had left the college and gone to universities in different parts of the country by the time the subsequent data analysis process was completed. This meant that it was not possible to share the outcomes with the students themselves, although the general findings could be shared with the college.



### **Setting – the policies of the college**

An examination of college policies was useful in gaining some background information about the research setting. There were particular documents relating to the careers education programme, such as lesson plans and resources, that could have been a useful resource for me, and it was unfortunate that the college was not prepared for me to take copies of such documents. This meant that my time for examining the documents was restricted to the time I had in the college, which meant that a detailed analysis was difficult to achieve. Despite my assurances of confidentiality, the position of the Careers Coordinator remained the same, and I had to work within the constraints imposed upon me. On reflection, this again shows the somewhat didactic culture of the college, and the power of the Careers Coordinator within the activity system. It is possible that I might have been able to avoid this position by being clearer about what I needed earlier on, however the outcome may well have been the same. Instead, I could have asked to observe sessions of careers education, which may well have received a more positive response.

### **Context – guidance and HE choice**

All research into professional issues takes place in a broader policy context, and in this study the policy context of career guidance and HE choice provided a context within which to examine some relevant issues. The government agenda for widening participation in HE discussed in Chapter 2 was particularly relevant, as many of the students in the college could be viewed as non-traditional applicants to HE, and as such are people that many universities may be keen to attract. At the time of the study, the Excellence Challenge (the forerunner of the Aimhigher programme) was just starting, and since then many more initiatives have been put in place to encourage more applications from students from ethnic minorities. However, other conflicting agendas, such as the introduction of top up fees, could work against this. Even so, all of the students in the study are keen to be able to participate in HE and want to

gain access, and most will become part of the activity system of HE for the many, rather than the few.

### **Possibilities for further research**

Tommy's metaphor of joining dots enabled me to begin to get some definition around the ZPD in a career guidance context, and this presents possibilities for further research within different contexts. Research could be carried out in other settings, such as schools, further education colleges, universities and workplaces, to seek to examine the ways in which people construct their career in society. Research could also be carried out with a range of clients, e.g. younger students in compulsory education, those with particular learning needs, adults, unemployed people and a range of age groups. This would explore the proposition of the ZPD as a useful concept applicable to lifelong learning.

The study itself focused primarily (although not exclusively) on the one to one career guidance interview, and it is clear that learning about career happens in a whole range of different situations. Further studies which explore the career learning of people in different career learning sites (Bliss et al, 1999) such as group work, sessions in careers education and the use of computers in career education and guidance, could all provide useful further insights into the application of the ZPD and situated learning.

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that irrespective of the situation, learning happens by participation in a community of practice, and this would seem to point to the value of an ethnographic style of research, where activity is observed over a period of time. This could take place in a sixth form college like the one in the study, or in a university with students from non-traditional backgrounds. The latter could focus on individual university students as the subject of the activity system of HE, and the ways in which they interact with other parts of the system. Another alternative might be to undertake a study

with a narrative approach, where students and perhaps former students are interviewed in an open way, reflecting on their experiences of access, entry and study at university.

In this chapter I have considered a range of issues in relation to the evaluation of the study. As a researcher it is important to reflect on these experiences and use them positively in the next experience. The next chapter offers some conclusions and recommendations for career guidance practice.



## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

In this final chapter conclusions and recommendations will be presented, and the study's relevance for practice will be discussed and evaluated. The degree to which the overall aims of the study have been achieved will be assessed, with reference to the research questions put forward in the first chapter. The chapter begins with a review of the research problem and the research questions, and continues with my interpretation of Tommy's metaphor, in order to seek to draw some conclusions from it. The chapter also returns to the stories of the other students, the story of Jimmy and to literature in order to add to this interpretation. Throughout I also reflect on my own biography.

#### **The aim of the study**

This qualitative study aims to investigate the ways in which a small number of students in a sixth form college are making their HE choices with the help of a Careers Adviser, and thereby, to explain the impact of career guidance on the HE choice process, as manifested in the career guidance interview. The benefits of this are new insights into and understandings of the career guidance process that the ZPD, situated learning and activity theory can bring to the research problem articulated in Chapter 1 on page 5. Here the research problem is identified as the inherent difficulties that Careers Advisers have in effectively promoting equality of opportunity in relation to HE choice and career, when society appears to influence people to conform to its expectations. The study seeks to explore any new light that Vygotsky's ZPD, situated learning and activity theory might be able to shed onto this, through the exploration of the following research questions.

1. How do the students demonstrate individual agency in the HE decision-making process?
2. What factors appear to influence their HE choices?

3. What influence can career guidance have on the dynamics between agency and society?
4. How can these new understandings enhance career guidance practice?

### **Tommy's metaphor**

Tommy's metaphor of joining dots took on a particular significance during the data analysis process, as it began to signify my understanding of the ZPD in a career guidance context. Tommy is seeking to draw his picture (me and my future) aided by a number of dots that he is trying to join up. The picture symbolises Tommy's development as a whole person, indeed through the process, Tommy is becoming a different person (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Tommy finds new dots in his picture, and his picture changes as he interacts with the Careers Adviser and constructs new knowledge about himself and HE choice. Tommy finds these new dots in his picture by participating in a career guidance interview, and even though the nature of the interview is somewhat didactic, Tommy still finds some dots, which help him with the task of constructing his picture.

Tommy's picture represents his holistic development towards his future. Bearing in mind the nature, scope and pace of change I imagine Tommy to be drawing his picture using a pencil, as a picture drawn in pencil can be changed much more easily than one drawn in ink. His picture is therefore flexible and dynamic. Tommy is holding the pencil and is drawing the picture himself. It is intricate and complicated, as a whole variety of factors, both internal and external to Tommy, are involved within it. These include both Tommy's own experiences and how he feels about himself (e.g. his assessment of his chances of gaining a place on a degree course, and his feelings about whether or not he will cope with the level and type of study) and the messages of society (e.g. people who have studied on BTEC National courses tend to do better on HND courses). Tommy's picture is one of his self developing within his social



context. This intricate and complex picture is indeed a work of art, and one that needs to be treated with care.

But in this imagined scenario, the degree to which Tommy is in control over how his picture develops is still contestable. As the artist, Tommy would appear to have the overall say in how it turns out, but is this really the case? How do self and society interact and how does this affect Tommy's picture? Pictures drawn in pencil can be changed easily by using erasers and, in taking this metaphor a step further, it is interesting to consider both who is holding the pencil and who uses the eraser or erasers. The data of the post-interview shows that Tommy sees himself as the artist holding the pencil and drawing the picture. He sees himself as an agent (research question 1), in that he feels he is the only person who can make his decisions and that he actively wants to do so. However, in the didactic culture of the interview does the pencil remain in Tommy's hand, or is the Careers Adviser trying to draw Tommy's picture for him? This seems very harsh on the Careers Adviser concerned, and whilst it does not seem fair to agree with this totally, it did appear from the data that he was trying to exert a level of influence over how Tommy drew his picture, by pointing out particular dots and highlighting their importance (e.g. HND courses). The data shows that as a result Tommy begins to think about himself differently, and uses an eraser to adjust his picture accordingly. In the case of Tommy it seems that as well as holding a pencil with which to draw his picture, he is also holding an eraser to make adjustments to it as he goes along. As he discovers more about himself and his possible options, Tommy needs to be able to assess himself in relation to his discoveries and adjust his drawing in response.

But is this always the case? The story of Gloria depicts an individual who does not see a reason to adjust her drawing of herself, and leaves it as it is, with dots that represent her application to Sports Science courses. So what might happen to Gloria's picture in the future? She may be accepted on the strength of her



sports background, in which case her picture remains, or she may be rejected, and her picture will be erased partially by external circumstances. In this case, society through university admissions tutors (research question 2) may take hold of the eraser and alter her picture by rubbing out certain parts of it. Gloria will then need to re-consider her options, find more dots, and use the pencil again to join them up and make a new or amended picture.

There may be other instances for Tommy and the other students in the future where society or external circumstances will take hold of an eraser and use it to rub out aspects, or even whole parts of their picture. One such example is redundancy, where an individual is caused to make a change of direction and do something different. When this happens, drawings might be erased in large part, and afterwards the people concerned may need to find new dots and join them up to draw a new picture of self. Other examples could be such things as illness, accident, injury or the onset of a condition that may force people to draw their picture differently.

Having reflected on Tommy's metaphor further, and the issue of erasers, I was also prompted to conclude that some of my own professional experiences, in particular some of the early ones described in my biography in Chapter 3 on pages 77 to 78, show instances of the ways in which society uses its eraser through stereotyping and discrimination. Tracy (p. 78) had initially dismissed the idea of painting and decorating as it was not something that conformed with her stereotypes of jobs for girls. However, through her own agency, the impact of society's eraser was overcome, and with my support, she was prepared to continue to draw her picture, make some applications for painting and decorating, and she succeeded in achieving her goal. Sonia (p. 78) by contrast was not prepared to use the pencil to try and draw her picture in relation to her interest in law. She appears to have internalised the messages of society's eraser when saying, "black girls do not become lawyers" and does not believe that such dots exist for her; hence she does not attempt to find

them. Both Tracy and Sonia's decisions were theirs to make through their own agency, and all individuals have to make such choices for themselves. The outcomes however are not totally within the control of the individual, as the discussion of Gloria's story shows (research question 3).

In relation to my own biography, I have learned that I am still drawing my own picture in an ongoing way. Thankfully I overcame the impact of the eraser of the Careers Adviser I met in school (see page 76) and, through my own agency and with the help and support of those around me, continued to draw my picture as I saw it. However, this is not meant to imply that I have total control over how my picture turns out, or that there will not be times when society's erasers will be at work on my picture.

### **Learning through participation**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that people learn through participation and that "learning through legitimate peripheral participation takes place no matter which educational form provides a context for learning" (p.40). The students in the study are part of the community of practice of the sixth form college and are learning through participation. Even though the career guidance interviews observed seem to give the students little opportunity to participate actively, they still learn things about themselves and their university choice.

However, Lave and Wenger's (1991) example of the butchers shows that learning can be positively restricted by a didactic culture, and it is important to consider the impact that culture can have on learning. Chapter 4 (p. 124 to 125) raises questions about the culture of the college and the ways in which it might impede Tommy and other students from finding and joining up their dots, or at least the ways in which students might be steered towards certain dots and not others. If people learn through participation where self and context are merged together, it then follows that the more active students can



be in their career guidance interviews, the more they will learn. The role of the Careers Adviser then becomes one of developing a culture where students can participate in order to both find and join their dots (research question 4).

So how might this culture be fostered? Many of the cornerstones of effective client-centred practice are evident here, such as listening to what students have to say, focusing on their interests, showing empathy and a positive and encouraging manner, along with the core condition of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1965). This all sounds very familiar to both trainee and experienced career guidance practitioners, but other aspects of Tommy's story highlight other issues related to impartiality and the promotion of equal opportunities; these include being careful not to steer the hand of the student drawing his or her picture and allowing the student to use the pencil himself or herself. Careers Advisers can achieve this by discussing a wide range of options with students, and allowing students to decide which ones are important for them. Bearing in mind that inclusion is not the same as normalisation (p. 32), it is also important that Careers Advisers remain at a healthy distance from erasers, and indeed actively point them out to students, discussing the impact they can have on pictures of self. Realism is still an issue that Careers Advisers and their clients will constantly face, and, as this study shows, is not something to which there are simple straightforward answers. However, by fostering a culture in career guidance where students are encouraged to research options for themselves and reach their own conclusions, they will, through their own agency, decide on a way forward that is right for them (research question 4). For some this will result in success, and others will need opportunities to discuss where things do not work out as planned.

This culture contrasts sharply with the didactic culture of the sixth form college in the study. In such a culture, students in the study appear to respond in one of two ways. Some like Tommy, Dele and Grace comply with the



messages they are given, and either lower their sights (e.g. to HND courses instead of degrees) or apply for courses even though they know they do not have the entry requirements. Others, like Gloria, Errol and Sandra persevere and try to make some progress towards their goals. Careers Advisers wanting to work in a client-centred way and fostering a culture of agency, can expect to encounter cultural clashes in some of the institutions in which they practise.

From the perspective of situated learning, Careers Advisers should also expect their practice to be conflictual, as students present with a range of issues, which can often be at odds with one another. HE choice is complex and priorities can sometimes clash directly with one another e.g. “I want to leave home” and “I need to survive financially, and living at home would be cheaper”. However, giving students an opportunity to air these tensions will help them reach compromises, if not their own solutions. Conflicts like those experienced by Sonia (p. 78) should be welcomed, in the sense that through such conflicts change may come about, albeit slowly.

All of the students in the study want to enter HE, but whilst in the sixth form, they have very few opportunities to cross the boundaries and participate in the HE system. It is important that programmes of careers education prepare students well for such things as HE visits and fairs, so that the students can use these to full effect and participate effectively. Students will also benefit from an opportunity to discuss and reflect on what they have learned. With so few opportunities to participate in HE, client-centred career guidance interviews can also offer some space for reflection, to enable students to think through various aspects of university life that they cannot yet experience directly. In a supportive culture, students will be enabled to find their own dots and draw their own pictures of self. But how does this relate to promoting equality of opportunity? Is it just up to individual agents to bring about change in this regard and can they do this alone? Or is there also a role for activity systems in bringing about expansive change?

### **Activity systems**

The study focuses on two activity systems (the sixth form college and HE) and the ways in which the two interact. The data shows little interaction between the two systems, other than through the instrument of the UCAS process, and through the participation of the students in such things as HE fairs. Bearing in mind that the ZPD suggests that people learn things that are proximal to them rather than at a distance, it is important to consider the ways in which students can become proximal to HE. All students without exception spoke of their HE visits and the HE fair, and of the ways in which this kind of participation had helped them make decisions about their HE choice. Such events had allowed them to cross the boundary and enter the activity system of HE and participate, albeit in a very peripheral way. The study shows that Careers Advisers can, and indeed do, encourage students to attend such visits, but bearing in mind their significance, students may also benefit from an opportunity to discuss what they found, the impressions they gained and the ways in which such visits had helped them in their thinking.

Overall, students in the study seem to have little opportunity to participate in the HE activity system, and indeed, the instrument of the UCAS process seems actively to keep the system at a distance, rather than making it proximal. So, are there other ways in which the HE system can move to become more proximal to the lives of the students? Students like Tommy are aware of the marketing strategies of universities, such as glossy prospectuses and videos. Initiatives such as summer schools for gifted and talented students and level zero courses do give some students a greater opportunity to participate; and I would now like to focus on one particular level zero initiative as an example of a way in which a university can make itself proximal to the lives of sixth form students in its community.

For the past few years the University of Glamorgan has been running a level zero course for its own students (those on Access courses) and sixth formers



studying in local schools. The course takes the students through the UCAS process, and any assessed work set is work that students would have to complete as part of the UCAS process (e.g. writing a good personal statement). The course is delivered wherever geographically possible, within the university, thereby giving students the chance to come into HE physically, get to know the buildings, staff and facilities and participate in the university community of practice. In cases where students cannot attend, as they live too far away from the university, the course is offered in their school or college, but is delivered by university staff. The university uses this programme as one arm of its widening participation strategy, and, as one of the staff running the programme said “obviously the university sees it as a great way of widening participation and attracting people to Glamorgan. As far as we are concerned, we are not worried if they come to us or go to Birmingham or Bristol. It’s good for widening participation to HE generally” (notes from a meeting attended in June 2004). During the academic year 2003-04 around 2,500 students from sixth forms in South Wales participated in the community of practice of the University of Glamorgan by undertaking this level zero programme. This is going to increase in the future as other parts of Wales have become interested in the initiative.

This particular example shows one way in which the activity system of HE can move to become proximal to the lives of sixth form students in its region. This example shows that it is not simply students, who through their own agency can become proximal to the activity system of HE, but that there are things that HE can do in order to become more proximal to the lives of sixth form students. When both happen together, proximity is maximised, and we can expect that more students will choose to go to university who have traditionally not done so in the past, and participation will be widened. One real advantage of the Glamorgan initiative would appear to be that it allows the sixth form students to participate in groups or collectives, where they can receive support from one another, as well as from staff.



The story of Jimmy also shows that when activity systems (like the activity system of professional snooker) are open, newcomers can gain access to participation, through which over a period of time they can become established members of the community of practice. When the HE system, as in the case of Glamorgan University, is open to the participation of newcomers, including those who may not previously have thought of themselves as university students, it can expect that through this participation some will want to become part of the community of practice in the longer term. People with little history of HE will begin to think that HE could be for them after all, and through their participation change can be brought about from within, as more students from non-traditional backgrounds become members of the community of practice.

None of this is meant to imply that large-scale systemic change, such as that which is needed if the segregated nature of the UK's HE system is to be addressed, can happen overnight. It is also not meant to imply that every individual who participates in such initiatives will automatically want to gain entry to HE. Indeed, the story of the butchers (Lave and Wenger, 1991) provides us with a cautionary tale regarding the ways in which learning can be restricted when power within the community of practice is used in order to deny access to learning. However, through both the enthusiasm and commitment of individual agents (of which there is plenty, according to the data from this study) together with the commitment of activity systems to become proximal to the lives of a wider range of students, by giving them real opportunities to participate, change can happen; and students such as those from ethnic minorities could then study in a whole range of HE institutions in the UK, as a result of transformatory change through expansive learning (Engeström, 2001)

### **The role of guidance**

Bearing all of the above in mind, what is, then, the role of career guidance in promoting equality of opportunity in relation to HE choice? It appears that

courses like those at the University of Glamorgan can and do achieve much in terms of widening participation in HE, and seek to bring about expansive change in the university's activity system. As more students from non-traditional backgrounds enter university, they join collectives that can have an influence and bring about change from within. Over time it is even possible that some of these students might become university staff members, with a greater level of power within the division of labour of the activity system. However, it is important to remember that even though an activity system like that of Glamorgan may be very open to the participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds, without the agency of individual students in South Wales, the status quo will remain, unless those students who would not have considered HE before are prepared to shelve their doubts, and give it a try. Unless and until individuals like Sonia (p. 78) decide through their own agency not to allow society to erase their dots, but to find them and join them up, things will not change. Ultimately change only happens when individuals join together with others to participate in a community of practice, and bring about change from within. Put simply, without individuals, there are no collectives.

There appears then to be a clear role for career guidance in fostering individual agency, through creating a culture of participation, and it seems ideally placed to do this, with its emphasis on working with individuals. Students who have been encouraged to participate in the community of practice of guidance (e.g. in career guidance interviews) will become skilled at participating, and better prepared for participation in HE and the self-directed nature of study there. They will also begin to develop the skills needed both to find their dots and join them up, equipping them to construct their career throughout their lives. Students will inevitably learn through participation, whatever the setting, but they will learn more in a supportive culture, which encourages them to learn about themselves in their social context. The challenges posed by such issues as realism and conflicting government agendas will remain, but in a culture where people are given the opportunity to develop individual agency with



support, they may feel free to choose the non-traditional option (whatever that might be), and equality of opportunity will be promoted. However, ultimately the choice is always theirs.

Careers Advisers can, and indeed should, expect their practice to be conflictual (Lave and Wenger, 1991), as they enable students to work through the dilemmas and tensions that they experience in trying to draw their pictures of self. Both individual and societal factors will be at work, and will often present themselves in direct conflict with one another. Thinking back on my own experience of career guidance at school, reminds me of some of the conflicts I experienced between my own emerging self and society more generally, such as “I would like to go to university” and “people like you work in Boots or banking”. Providing students with a supportive culture of participation will enable them to work through such tensions for themselves and reach their own conclusions.

So, is the role of guidance limited to its work with individuals, or is there a broader role in relation to its work with activity systems? Career guidance practitioners are ideally placed to work at the interface between the activity system of HE and those of schools and sixth form colleges. For example, through local partnerships, career guidance practitioners could be involved in the delivery of level zero courses, like the one at Glamorgan University, and are well placed to offer ongoing support to students when they go back into their schools and colleges to continue drawing their pictures of self. At a strategic level, managers of career guidance services can encourage their local HE partners to provide opportunities for young people and adults to participate in the community of practice of HE, by working together to provide level zero courses, thereby promoting equality of opportunity and widening participation.



### **Further implications of the research**

Completion of the study presents implications both for the initial education of Careers Advisers (my own professional function) and for the professional development of Careers Advisers more generally, which will now be explored.

The findings from the study show that the concepts of the ZPD, situated learning and activity theory have much to offer to the debate around the effective promotion of equality of opportunity and social justice, by offering alternative perspectives and interpretations both of how people make HE choices and how they learn about career. This is particularly relevant to the following two areas of the curriculum within the Qualification in Careers Guidance. Firstly, an examination of the concepts within Equal Opportunities Values and Ethics could enable students to understand more about the dynamics between self and society, and the ways in which equality of opportunity and social justice can be promoted. Secondly, the study could provide an alternative perspective on constructivist approaches to career within the curriculum area of Theoretical Basis of Guidance Practice. Both of these developments are already in hand for the next academic year within my own institution.

These developments in knowledge and understanding of practice could also be shared more widely amongst professionals with a commitment to continuing professional development within the career guidance community. This can be achieved through publications in both academic and professional journals, by presentations at conferences and through contributions to Masters programmes in career guidance, such as the one in my own institution. Hopefully such activities could ultimately enhance the quality of career guidance, particularly in the area of HE choice.

### **Summary and final conclusions**

In Chapter 1 the research problem was identified, and a range of literature relevant to the problem was critically reviewed in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 a critique of the methodology and method of the study was offered, and Chapter 4 focused on data analysis through an examination of the stories of the students. In Chapter 5 an evaluation of the study was carried out and this final chapter has focused on conclusions and recommendations.

To conclude I will reflect on the research problem identified and summarise my key findings in relation to this. Careers Advisers are required to promote equality of opportunity, but even in a climate of widening participation in HE, how can this be done effectively when society encourages people to conform to its norms? What new perspectives might Vygotsky's ZPD, situated learning and activity theory have to offer?

Tommy's metaphor provides a description of the ZPD in a career guidance context, and is the difference between his picture of himself before his interview and after it. Tommy's picture is holistic and the ZPD describes the ways in which he is developing in society and becoming a different person. Tommy is not simply conforming to what society expects, but in the ZPD self and society are inseparable. Tommy's picture is a complex work of art, and is one that he will continue to draw throughout his life.

Theories of situated learning argue that people learn through participation in communities of practice. Through some participation in HE (e.g. visits, fairs and level zero courses) students from non-traditional backgrounds can become different people, people who might progress on into membership of the community of practice of HE, irrespective of society's messages. There is a clear role for guidance in helping students to think through aspects of university life and study that they cannot yet experience for themselves. Careers Advisers need to foster a culture of participation in their work, and



encourage individual agency, in order to enable students to find their own dots and draw their own pictures of self. Without individual agents from non-traditional backgrounds deciding that HE is for them, the segregated HE system in the UK will remain.

But as well as individuals, HE systems also have decisions to make. Activity theory shows the ways in which activity systems can be open to transformatory change from within. HE systems can choose to become proximal to the students in their locality by positively encouraging participation, or they can choose to remain distant. The study shows students who have high levels of individual agency and are keen to participate. However, they need opportunities to engage actively in such participation, which only the HE system can provide. Careers Advisers are ideally placed within a framework of client-centred guidance practice to foster a culture of individual agency in their work, but alone this is not enough in order to promote equality of opportunity effectively. If a non-segregated HE system, where every university has a whole range of students from different backgrounds is to be achieved, universities have to play their part too in being open and encouraging participation, and thereby becoming proximal to the lives of their prospective students. When individual agents like the students in the study take up opportunities provided by HE to participate in the system, change can begin to come about from within, and equality of opportunity and social justice for students from ethnic minorities will begin to become a reality, not simply an ideal.

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Barbara Bassot    M7234662    E990

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Research instruments**

#### **Schedule for the pre-interview**

What are you hoping to gain from your interview today?

What subjects are you studying at the moment?

What in particular are you hoping to discuss?

How have you reached this point?

What are you hoping to apply for?

Where did you start?

What have you been able to find out so far about your university choices?

How have you found this out?

E.g. did you attend the HE fair? If yes, how do you feel it helped you?

What resources have you used?

Anything else you would like to say?

**Observation schedule for use during the career guidance interview**

**Symbol/information processing**

Understand

Work out

In my mind

Focus

Thoughtful

Calculate

Interpret

Others

**Constructivism**

Find out

For myself/on my own

Research

Using the internet

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Others

**Culturalism**

Credibility (with friends etc.)

Expectations (from, friends, family etc.)

Stereotypes

Pressure

Others

**Social constructivism (including the ZPD and scaffolding)**

**ZPD**

Possibilities

Likely/unlikely

Potential

Development



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Expectations of self

Predict

Career prospects, promotion

Growth

Fulfilment

Dream

Forecast

Ideal

Anxiety

Uncertainty

Confusion

Others

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Scaffolding  
Strategy

Planning

Action

Perspectives

Others

Narratives  
Experience

Explain

My situation

My progress so far

My view of myself

Others

**Schedule for the post-interview**

What did you feel you gained from the interview with the Careers Adviser?

What do you now feel you understand that perhaps you didn't before the interview?

Were there issues that were covered that you had not thought about before? If so, what were they?

What were your thoughts during the interview?

What are your thoughts now?

Are your views changing, and if so how?

How might you look at your HE choices differently?

What do you feel you need to do next?

How will you go about this?

Anything else you would like to say?